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EPITHALAMIUM

(L'EPITHALAME)

Translated from the French
of
JACQUES CHARDONNE



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN, LTD.

First published 1923

Printed at
The Westminster Press
411a Harrow Road, London, W.9

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1923

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

L'Epithalame, by Jacques Chardonne, was awarded the Northcliffe Prize for the best French novel in 1922, and on the first voting, took equal place with *Batouala* for the Prix Goncourt. This, the authorised English translation, has been made from M. Chardonne's later and abridged version of his famous novel.

ALDEN APR 5 - 1954
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CHAPTER I

SEEING her mother anxiously occupied by household cares, Bertha Dégouy, a thoughtful little girl, came to the conclusion that people were unhappy because they were either lazy or careless ; and she thought of Aunt Christine with her calm expression and strangely youthful eyes, her cheerfulness and pretty dresses ; she found in this attractive old lady the embodiment of a happy and well-ordered existence. One day, when Bertha was crying because she could not go to Fondebaut with her sister Emma, Aunt Christine took her on her knee, saying,

“ Come ! Make up your mind not to think about it any more,” and wiped the child’s eyes with a fine handkerchief, soft as a feather and scented with verbenas.

Later on, Bertha remembered this effort of will. She realised its importance, and resolving to develop self-control, she got up at seven to practise the piano in the cold drawing-room.

Her friend, Marie-Louise Chaurant, came every Thursday during that cold winter, and the two little girls sat upstairs in Bertha’s room burning their fingers over making hot buttered toast for tea. The days were short, and Marie-Louise, sitting at her friend’s feet, gazed into

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the fire. The two children loved this cosy firelit time when, carried far from everyday surroundings, they discussed the arrangement of their future homes, a subject of never-failing interest debated in solemn whispers with a great opinion of their own ideas and experience of life. Then, all at once, when Bertha lit the lamp, these serious people became children again.

On certain days the Ducroquet children, with André and Marie-Louise Chaurant, met at the Bonifas' big house : Alice Bonifas had an endless supply of playthings ; also they could run about all over the house just as they liked. André would suggest a game of hide-and-seek and invariably hid with Yvonne Ducroquet in a cupboard where they remained for hours crouching down close to one another, and no one ever tried to find them. With superb cooking utensils in real copper the little girls would make sweets in Alice's toy kitchen-range, their cheeks growing crimson from hanging over the fire, and then, being in too great a hurry to taste the melted sugar, they burnt their fingers. They both ended by feeling rather sick after scraping out the casseroles.

At the time of the annual fair, the schoolroom was transformed into a theatre or menagerie, with André Chaurant as stage manager ; and Bertha and he, with Alice Bonifas and her governess, would go to see a play at Sambuc's theatre, an exciting event which filled André with longing to be an actor. Then one fine day

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the theatre suddenly vanished, and nothing remained of the circus but a surprisingly small round of trampled ground.

A year after the fair, André, bored with lessons and games, decided to run away ; he confided this project to Bertha, who, knowing him to be an extraordinary boy, took it quite as a matter of course. This was their secret ; she made up a parcel for him, containing a suit of clothes and some chocolate, and André's departure was fixed for the following evening. He slipped quietly out of the house and walked as far as Merignac. He had carefully planned his journey up to that point, but had not the faintest idea where he would go afterwards.

The next day Bertha thought with dismay of Mme. Chaurant's grief at losing her boy, but when she went to their house to see Marie-Louise, there was André after all, and she was not in the least surprised.



A square of vineyard, some rows of maize and Jerusalem artichokes were growing in the harvested fields, and these, with the wild carrots, gave a dusty, chalky look to the dull country. The horse walked up the last hill, and André turned to Bertha.

"Are you all right ?" he asked. "I can't say much for our carriage. I hear that Mme. Brun is at Fondebaud."

They went on at a trot ; Bertha, holding on

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to the splashboard with one hand, touched her hair with the other, her eyes fixed on the vanishing road while she thought of Marie Brun. She had never met Mme. Brun at Noizic, but remembered having seen her at the seaside, at Médis, a strange beautiful woman whom she had watched on the sea-front or in the forest, always accompanied by that tall fellow, Essener.

Soon the carriage was rolling along a shady oak avenue : the young girl at once recognised the figure of Marie Brun in the midst of a group of ladies in front of the château as Mme. Chaurant stepped carefully out of the carriage.

"Hasn't Emma come . . . ? What a charming dress, my dear," said Mme. Ducroquet, kissing Bertha, and adding, in a tone at once cheerful and imperative, "The young people are at tennis ; go and put on your shoes, girls."

In spite of screens and curtains, the solid stone walls of the drawing-room at Fondebaud seemed to chill one. Marie-Louise put on her tennis-shoes at the foot of the stairs in the large tiled hall, whilst Bertha, standing at a window, watched a young man who was walking in the grounds with M. Ducroquet.

On leaving the chateau, she caught sight of Mme. Brun talking to this same young man ; she looked at Bertha, and at almost the same moment he too turned his head in her direction.

"Hurry up," Marie-Louise urged in a whisper.

"You live in beautiful country," said the young man, suddenly coming up to Bertha.

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"Best of all, I adore this wonderful light ; its peculiar brilliance must be due to being near the sea. Look at this," he exclaimed, stopping before a group of tree-trunks bathed in sunlight, "it's like gold-dust. Do you live at Noizic ? "

"Yes, I live at Noizic."

"What a delightful place it is ! My father and I have stayed here for the last two summers ; we have taken La Picauderie. I am Albert Pacaris—Mme. Brun brought me to-day. Shall we go and watch the tennis ? I don't know a soul here ; you must tell me who everybody is ; I suppose the little blue-eyed girls are M. Ducroquet's daughters ? There is one called Lila."

"Her real name is Elizabeth," Bertha replied, laughing, "but she is always called Lila."

"Mme. Le Brigueil must have been a very beautiful woman ; she is still handsome. I spoke to her daughter for a moment ; she is pretty, but her accent spoils her—you haven't a trace of the Charente accent."

"You think not ? " Bertha rejoined, trying to keep step with Albert, and turning her smiling eyes to his as he looked at her.

His free-and-easy tone surprised her at first and even seemed a little impertinent. She replied without shyness, in a very sweet voice, for it was the first time anyone had spoken to her as a grown-up girl.

"Have you been at Médis ? " Albert asked.

"How did you know ? "

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"Oh, never mind how I know."

"Do tell me," she entreated, looking him straight in the eyes without ceasing to smile.

"You make me curious."

"It is my secret."

"Do tell me ; please, please do," she cried, pouting.

"All right. Look here ; it is easily explained. As you came out of the house Mme. Brun said to me, 'I saw that pretty little girl at Médis.' But . . . after all . . . are you a little girl ?" he asked, stopping abruptly. "You have the eyes of a grown-up person—I mean thoughtful eyes ; yet you look like a child," he continued slowly, taking in her hair and dress.

"I am fourteen," she said simply.

"Oh, fourteen ; I should have thought you were more."

"You know Mme. Brun ?" asked Bertha.

"I met her in Paris, in Blanchet's studio. Why—does that surprise you ?" he inquired, looking sharply at her. "Do you know Lazare Essener ?"

She blushed at this thoughtless question, and, suddenly embarrassed, quickened her steps towards the tennis-court.

In spite of her efforts, Mme. Ducroquet could not rally the young people for tea. Albert returned to Bertha's side and said, "M. Ducroquet overwhelms me with kindness ; he has offered me his car ; he wants me to come here every day. It is really too much of a good thing—

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he won't leave me alone. Do you often come to Fondebaud ? ”

“ I come nearly every Thursday during the summer.”

“ I shall come on Thursday,” said Albert, smiling.

♦ ♦ ♦

“ I have waited two hours for you ; I thought you could not be coming to-day,” said Albert in a low voice to Bertha, while Marie-Louise was looking for her racquet. “ I have walked an enormous distance in this heat ; I was furious at finding only the little Ducroquets—I call them little,” he continued, seating himself on a stone bench, “ and yet they are older than you. As for you, you seem to understand everything one says. You make such astounding remarks ; and your eyes . . . ! What is the age-limit of childhood ? Children play as seriously as men work ; they have opinions of their own from the moment they begin to think ; Marie Brun tells me she was in love at twelve. When I asked what effect it had on her she replied, ‘ I wanted to lay my head on his shoulder.’ She was easily satisfied—but she was really in love.”

“ Is Mme. Brun away ? ” asked Bertha.

“ Yes—in Scotland. Do you know, you're a little like Marie Brun ? ”

“ She is the Ducroquets' cousin.”

“ I know ; but you ought to be her cousin. You are darker, but your eyes, your charm. . . .

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Yes, she is an extraordinary woman ; what a life she leads ! First of all, she is always in love, and that, I may tell you, is most uncommon."

He leant down to pick up a ball from under the seat and threw it to Laurent Ducroquet, hitting him in the face as he was adjusting his eye-glasses.

"We were speaking of Mme. Brun—well, Essener loads her with expensive presents. She is much liked at Noizic. You notice that the flock of mothers—as your friend André calls them—welcome her warmly, in spite of the fact that she lives with a man who is not her husband. On one occasion I asked you if you knew Essener and you seemed annoyed ; that excites my interest. People say he is a good fellow."

"My sister knows him. I saw him at Médis—a very tall man."

"Shall I tell you Mme. Brun's history ? Can you keep a secret ? You will not tell André Chaurant or your sister ? Promise me."

Bertha, confused, though curious, cast down her eyes, her face hidden by the brim of her hat.

"Good. But come closer . . . that's it. Look at the game—they must not think I am telling you anything confidential. Look—André is winning. Bravo, Monsieur Ducroquet !" he cried, then murmured to Bertha : "She was only fifteen ; her house faced the college yard—this detail is important——"

All at once the game came to an end and Bertha rose abruptly. Albert watched her walk

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across the lawn and take Yvonne's arm, laughing merrily as she did so. She suddenly struck him as being quite insignificant, and he walked away in the direction of the château.

♦ ♦ ♦

M. Dégouy was silent at meals. He rested his head in his hands with an air of melancholy which, being habitual, remained unnoticed. He would fix his eyes on his daughter and watch her narrowly. At bed-time, Bertha often heard through the walls the angry voice that she had learned to fear ; she stopped her ears and said her prayers aloud, but could not help understanding that her father was complaining to Mme. Dégouy about her visits to Fondebaud.

But when André called for her and Marie-Louise the next day, she changed her dress quickly and jumped into the carriage.

Albert was late in arriving at Fondebaud that afternoon, and André had just ordered the carriage to return home. " I am going away next week," said the late visitor, stepping up to Bertha, who was putting on her hat in the hall. " I don't suppose I shall come back. Paris is a dull place—I shall often think of you. When we meet again you will be grown up, and you will have forgotten me."

" I shall not forget you," Bertha said.

" I came to say good-bye to you to-day. I am sorry to have to say it before all these people, when I may perhaps never see you again. Do

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you never go out alone? I hear that Marie-Louise will be spending to-morrow with you. What time will she leave?"

"About six o'clock."

"Listen," Albert went on, speaking quickly, whilst turning his head towards Mme. Ducroquet, and assuming an unconcerned air. "Go with Marie-Louise as far as Montembert farm. Directly you part from her you will see me coming out of the farm; it is the most ordinary thing in the world for me to be on the road."

Bertha replied to these remarks without really understanding their significance. The following day, on opening the gate to accompany Marie-Louise as usual, she remembered the young man's words but attached no importance to them and walked quietly along the familiar road, where it seemed impossible for anything unusual to happen.

She kissed her friend "Good-bye" just before reaching Montembert farm, and began to retrace her steps, when suddenly she found Albert walking beside her.

"You are a dear little thing," he said, "I have been waiting for you; I was afraid you would not summon up courage to come, and yet there's nothing in it. We shan't meet a single soul on the road."

Abashed and frightened by this deferential man who took off his hat when speaking to her, she stood still, and began to think of Nelly

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Poussin, who, they said, had lost her reputation. No doubt this was just how young girls came to grief; she too had sinned and would be punished.

"*Au revoir*, Mademoiselle Bertha," said Albert, as though some wild idea which had flashed through his brain were dispelled by this timid child's influence and that of the peaceful country road.

"Give me your hand; I must be off—your little childish hand. This is how they say good-bye to little Polish girls," he added lightly, putting her slight fingers to his lips.

Bertha knew she was guilty, but was astonished at feeling so little remorse. This young man had really thought perfectly natural what she felt to be sinful. On considering certain words of Albert's, she concluded that there were respectable people who excused Marie Brun's conduct. In fact, no one seemed quite sure what was or was not right. She tried to put all this to Abbé Perpère in confession, but when she began to discuss the matter and reason it out he interrupted her. All he wanted was regret and repentance.

She decided to speak about it one Sunday to her mother on the way home from mass, but Mme. Dégouy went into a shop.

"How slow mother is in choosing things," the young girl thought as she stood waiting. "She wants to be sure that everything she buys pleases her son-in-law."

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Bertha became critical and impatient. "She is good to her family. She wants her son-in-law to say, 'Mother, you spoil me!' but she isn't really generous. How hard she is on the poor!"

Loaded with parcels, Mme. Dégouy emerged from the shop, her kind face covered with perspiration and her mind concentrated on getting home in time for lunch. She trotted along as fast as she was able, which irritated Bertha, who had waited for this moment to speak to her about the thing that had been troubling her.

"We could quite well have the carriage out on Sunday," Bertha said.

"No, dear."

"But you make everything so difficult!" She knew her mother had a mania for depriving herself of certain necessary things, and would economise in crusts of bread and boxes of matches without due regard to the important items of household expenditure which her daughter suspected were excessive.

"Let me shade you from the sun," said Bertha, "it is quite hot for October. I hear that Laurent Ducroquet is not going back to Rochefort with André. I wonder why he was sent to Rochefort when his parents live at Tours all the winter?"

"He had started his studies at Rochefort."

"I didn't tell you I met Mme. Brun at the Ducroquets'. I think she has gone to Scotland now. She came to stay with her mother, but did not stay long."

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Mme. Dégouy made no reply but walked faster than ever. Presently she looked severely at her daughter.

"Your hair is all over your eyes ; if it weren't so puffed out it wouldn't be so untidy."

"And if we were not going so fast," Bertha panted.

"I don't want to be late ; Edward and Emma are coming to lunch."

"Yes, mother, I know, but there's no reason to shop at the last minute." And they nagged at one another until they reached home.

"Mother would not listen when I spoke of Marie Brun, but avoided the subject," the young girl told herself. "She found fault with my hair because she didn't want to discuss Marie Brun, and replied crossly, in order to hide from herself her incapacity for reasoning. She does the same thing with father, and is so weak-minded that she avoids debatable subjects, and compensates herself by bad temper."

Bertha gave up troubling about people whose faults she saw too clearly. Left to her own devices, she had to find inward consolation and decided to work harder, making a plan of daily study which she pinned on her bedroom wall. She got up at six to go over her last year's work, practised the piano for four hours daily, and read novels chosen haphazard from her father's library—novels which Mme. Dégouy, judging merely by their titles, thought unsuitable and took away from her. The girl did not insist on love-

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stories ; she wanted to find out about people and the great world which seemed so out of reach, and about which she was so curious.

Finding her studies interrupted by this desultory reading, Bertha, in a penitent mood, arranged a programme more severe than the first, and this time pinned it above her little writing-table. She tried to read history in the numerous volumes of Henri Martin, which occupied an entire shelf of the library, and feeling too tired by the evening to take in this writer's erudition, a dreamy idleness and slight discouragement would take possession of her ; laying one hand on the book, she would examine the fingers Albert had looked at, wondering whether he had found them pretty or ugly, and ended by polishing her nails.



Mme. Dégouy kept to her room almost entirely after her husband's death. Bertha sometimes persuaded her to go into the garden, but she returned indoors almost immediately to write letters ; the once busy housewife did not now occupy herself in domestic matters, but became listless and dull. Once, finding her sitting near a wardrobe with large hinges, Bertha tried to distract her thoughts, and Mme. Dégouy spoke of her youthful days when M. Dégouy came every Sunday to see her. Bertha found it difficult to realise that her mother had ever lived in Paris ; she appeared absolutely

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indigenous to Noizic ; the girl heard with surprise unknown names and tried to picture this world of ancient friendships, festivities and keepsakes, this past which her mother revived with so much pleasure.

After her daughter had gone to bed, Mme. Dégouy would sit for a long time in her arm-chair as though unable to move, her head resting on a cushion. Sometimes she dozed, only to wake with a start, confused and wondering why she was alone in her room with the lighted lamp.

She had found it hard to settle down at Noizic in the first years of her married life, and now she felt a stranger in this great mansion—unable to live in it any longer.

For some time she concealed the fact that she had received a letter from her cousin, Mme. Quatrefage, advising her return to Paris ; she fancied she would like to live near her relative in the city which held such pleasant memories of her youth, and reminded herself that she could return to Noizic in the summer to see her grandchildren.

When Emma heard of the project she thought it preposterous, but Mme. Dégouy kept it in mind even when seeming to agree with her, and said one day to her son-in-law :

“ Edward, what do you say to becoming my tenant and paying me a small rent ? You are badly housed in town ; there is plenty of room here for your children and there’s a large garden.” ♦ ♦ ♦

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M. Chaurant often spoke to his wife of the Dégouys' financial affairs. He saw in the ruin of the Bonifas family, who had left Noizic to live in Paris, and in the Dégouys' pecuniary losses, a fulfilment of his predictions. Notwithstanding his large fortune, he lived economically with his careful, practical wife.



On finding M. Chaurant in her drawing-room Mme. Dégouy burst into tears. He had long avoided the house on account of a quarrel with her husband. After preliminary greetings he spoke of the difficulty of moving to Paris, and his hostess fidgeted in her chair and appeared to agree with him. Nevertheless, in a fortnight she had commissioned her cousin to find her a flat.

CHAPTER II

MME. QUATREFAGE secured her a new flat in a quiet street planted with trees; very suitable, she thought, for country people. Mme. Dégouy brought with her several pieces of antique furniture, rather too large for these little white-painted rooms. Bertha's window looked on to an ivy-covered wall, with tree-tops and a glimpse of sky beyond. At the same time, in this almost rural stillness one could hear the distant murmur of the city. After having called once on the Quatrefages, Mme. Dégouy declined all invitations on account of her mourning; she fought shy of the busy streets, so changed since her youth, and stayed at home in her flat where she saw no one.



Bertha lunched occasionally at the Quatrefages'. Their huge flat, its walls covered with pictures; the fettered, narrow life of her cousin Odette; M. Quatrefage's gloomy silence; the cheeky little Mercédès whom everyone admired and spoilt; her aunt's dyed hair;—all these things combined to oppress her during those interminable meals, which, thanks to Odette's good management, were so exquisitely cooked.

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One day while carving a chicken, M. Quatrefage, who seldom took any notice of Bertha, said to her :

“ You must have met my colleague, Pacaris, at Noizic.”

“ But Pacaris knew no one at Noizic,” said Mme. Quatrefage.

“ I know his son,” said Bertha, softly.

“ Albert has given up the diplomatic service ; he is now his father’s secretary,” Odette chimed in.

“ What’s that you’re saying ? ” cried M. Quatrefage, who made people around him repeat everything to save himself the trouble of listening.

Bertha longed to talk about Albert, but waited until luncheon was over to question Odette.

“ They are great chums,” Odette told her. “ After Mme. Pacaris’ death they could not bear to return to Saint Malo. I think it was mother who suggested their taking a house at Noizic.”

Bertha had told Hortense to fetch her in good time whenever she lunched with the Quatrefages, and she passed the remainder of the day with Alice Bonifas—it had been a great delight to find her childhood’s friend in Paris. She could never have imagined the wealthy and extravagant Alice leading a life of privation in the rue Lecourbe ; her house with its narrow staircase, and small low-ceiled rooms, seemed inexpressibly dreary, but Alice was oblivious of these discomforts and absorbed in her studies.

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The once brilliant Mme. Bonifas whom Bertha remembered was now a plaintive and pathetic creature ; only the grandmother, still wearing beautiful rings on her withered fingers, sitting up straight in her high-backed chair and welcoming her friends in her feeble voice, remained the same, always ready to listen and reply to all comers.

♦ ♦ ♦

With the advent of the first fine day Mme. Dégouy longed for Noizic.

“ Surely you are not going to leave Paris in May ? ” cried Bertha.

“ You must not take this year into account at all,” rejoined her mother. “ You can take your books to Noizic, and Mme. Picard will help you with your work.”

Mme. Dégouy took a dislike to Paris from the moment she decided to go to Noizic ; she put away her winter clothes and wrote to Emma every day, dreamt constantly of her old home, so well kept and spacious, and so worried the young maid with her final arrangements in the flat, that the girl gave notice.

“ I shall not try to find another maid ; we can go at once,” said Mme. Dégouy to her daughter. “ Her leaving simplifies things wonderfully. Emma and I have arranged everything. I shall have the blue bedroom ; you will have your own.”

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Bertha consoled herself with the prospect of seeing Marie-Louise Chaurant again.

♦ ♦ ♦

One changes at Tonnay for Noizic. The train waits in a siding at Tonnay for the Paris express to pass and then starts much later with a good deal of shifting and whistling.

To the travellers the somewhat bare landscape with its poplars and nut-trees, its white houses, its vineyards and fields of wheat and maize, was like a foretaste of home. Bertha recognised the name of each station; voices spoke the familiar provincial dialect on the gravelled platforms.

And now the country became flatter; the pastures were dotted with willows, and Bertha, leaning out of the window to inhale the pure air, saw that they were approaching the salt-marshes. Then, on a strip of barren land by the sea, came Noizic.

The driver from the Hotel de la Boule d'Or recognised them as they were leaving the station; Mme. Dégouy, followed by her luggage, greeted Emma, and Bertha got into the omnibus; the huge vehicle, immovable beside the pavement, vibrated under the shock of the heavy trunks, then jolted off with all its windows rattling. Bertha gazed at the half-forgotten streets thus suddenly brought back to her memory. She recognised M. Anduse a long way off, in front of a café, and the newspaper-man who trotted along blowing his horn; on the bridge they

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came across Mme. Denis, who peered into the omnibus and followed them for a long time with her eyes.

Bertha ran up to her room the moment they entered the house. The noise of her door, the light through the window, half covered with virginia creeper, the bed, the walls, the whole atmosphere of home pervaded the place like an overpowering scent and almost stifled her with joy. She opened all the drawers of her bureau to find little hidden treasures, rummaged in the wardrobe, climbed on to the roof to look through a skylight at the view of the salt-marshes, and went down into the garden to the fir-trees and summer-house, gathering up memories which had been too quickly effaced. Indoors, exclamations from Mme. Dégouy could be heard ; the smiling housemaid followed Hortense, and old John who had carried up the luggage went gingerly down the stairs in his hobnailed boots.

♦ ♦ ♦

On the following Thursday Bertha went to Fondebaud.

“ Well, my dear,” said Mme. Ducroquet, making room for her by her side, “ how do you like being in Paris ? I suppose you attend classes ? Do you find the masters very charming ? ” Before Bertha could reply, Mme. Ducroquet had already turned, smiling vivaciously, to speak to Mme. de Brigueil :

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"You know the Dégouys live in Paris now."

Bertha went out to the tennis-court, then returned to Mme. Ducroquet, or rather, sat in the library looking at some reviews. Fondebaud, which she used to find so jolly, seemed dull, and the way people stared at one was depressing: a little talk would have improved matters, but Marie-Louise hardly spoke at all, and Antoinette, absorbed in watching the tennis, replied in monosyllables.

"I hope I am not in the way?" she said on one occasion, seating herself on the bench near Lucie Ducroquet's deck chair.

"Rather not," replied Lucie, with her charming smile. "I am delighted to see you."

Bertha folded her hands in her lap and continued: "I think Laurent arrives to-morrow night"; then she smiled and leaned back in her seat, for she saw a young man approaching the château by way of the oak avenue. It was Albert Pacaris.

Overwhelmed with shyness, she hung her head and, longing to run away, she nervously smoothed back her hair under her hat. Mme. Ducroquet, followed by Albert, walked along the front of the house in search of her daughter.

"So it was you sitting on the bench," said Albert, suddenly speaking to Bertha when Mme. Ducroquet had gone off with Lucie. "I should not have recognised you." Then he went on, slowly, "Two years! You have blossomed out into a young lady."

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Raising her eyes, she looked at him for the first time and noticed that his moustache was longer and darker than formerly, and that this slightly altered his appearance.

"I hear you live in Paris," said Albert. "Have you relatives there?"

"My aunt, Mme. Quatrefage. I believe you know her."

"Mme. Quatrefage? yes, I should think so. How strange that Odette Quatrefage should be your cousin! At one time we always spent the summer at Saint Malo with the Quatrefages. You get on with Odette, don't you?"

"She is very nice. I must say I find her rather cold and . . . and a little insignificant."

"Only in appearance," rejoined Albert; "when she was a child she was not allowed the slightest amusement. Her mother constantly said to her, 'Life is not all pleasure'; and yet the dear lady herself was always in search of pleasure. I don't mean that Mme. Quatrefage led a fast life, only a very frivolous one. Odette has been strictly brought up. I take it that you are the only friend she is allowed to have. She is very self-contained, and in some ways highly developed. You know she keeps house? I am sure she adores you. But perhaps you are right; after all, she isn't very intelligent."

Then he spoke abruptly, fixing his eyes on Bertha. "I am looking for the face I used to know. You had lovely eyes." A moment of silence and then, "Now they are less childlike."

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He thought of the shy little girl on the road, and his eyes rested on Bertha's hand, clasping the back of the seat. She drew it quickly away.

"There is the Chaurants' carriage," said Albert. "They will be calling you. I will say 'Good-bye' to you here. . . . Good-bye, Mademoiselle Bertha. You are perfectly charming." He kept Bertha's hand in his, and added, "You no longer have the hands of a child; it seems to me they are not so nervous."

She felt powerless to disengage her hand from this soft pressure, which took complete possession of it.

"Good-bye! I hope we shall soon meet again."

♦ ♦ ♦

In her room, remembering Albert's words, Bertha stood before the mirror and looked at her eyes. She had often been told she was lovely, and had not believed it, but now she was fully aware of her beauty, it was as though he had given it to her, and she sang as she went down into the drawing-room. A vague presentiment of coming happiness had taken possession of her.

♦ ♦ ♦

André Chaurant was playing tennis with Thérèse de Brigueil as his partner. He handed her a ball in a friendly way, murmured something, then bounded nimbly towards the net:

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the set finished, he came and sat on the seat by Bertha's side.

"I am so hot," he gasped.

"You look it; you are always hot," said Bertha, touching André's thin hand.

Mme. de Brigueil came up with Albert. She carried her head in a manner to display to the best advantage her fading beauty. Albert took a step towards Antoinette, then sat down by Bertha.

"I have been watching you," he said. "I am always paying you compliments; they do you no harm, but you must beware of men. They ruin women with their flattering tongues. With me you are quite safe; I shan't spoil you."

"You seem out of spirits sometimes," she said at length, in the quiet half-tones she used when speaking to him.

"Out of spirits? No, I am never out of spirits." He looked towards the laurel hedge on one side of the tennis court, and spoke abruptly:

"Will those two people ever stop looking for balls?"

Thérèse and André were among the bushes, their heads bent, apparently absorbed in the search.

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Albert rejoined Bertha under the chestnut tree:

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"Chaurant is a charming fellow. He's clever and much younger than his years ; so gay and lively," and reseating himself, he continued : "Look here, I have a good idea. You must see our house ; La Picauderie is worth visiting. You've never seen it, and we can talk better there. For a whole month I have not been able to get a word with you. Look, Laurent is coming to speak to us. Let me arrange this little expedition with Chaurant—it will be quite easy. Some morning about eleven o'clock he will come with his sister or fetch you in his trap. You will drive past La Picauderie. . . . I shall be on the road. Is it so alarming? I don't say to-morrow, but later on ; perhaps next week."

Albert beckoned to André Chaurant.

"Sit down here," said Albert, who invariably smiled when speaking to André. "As you are such a bold man I will give you a chance to distinguish yourself."

"You frighten me," said André, drawing nearer to Albert to make room for Thérèse. "I am really very timid."

Marie-Louise came towards them with Laurent, whose great amusement was to make toys out of twigs.

"Off with you !" said André, drawing nearer to Albert, "M. Pacaris has something to tell me."

"I will tell you another time."

"Now then ! What shall we do ? Come on,

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Thérèse," cried André, taking the little girl by the arm, "let's have some doubles; what are you dreaming about, Bertha?"

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Bertha put on her freshly-ironed mauve muslin dress, for Mme. Dégouy had given her consent to the expedition; she felt that her daughter needed a little amusement. Bertha, filled with pleasant anticipation, arranged her hair before the mirror under the large white hat André so much admired. She was curious to see Albert's surroundings. At the sound of wheels, she dashed some scent on her handkerchief and ran out of the house.

"You can go straight on," she said, as she climbed into the carriage by means of the little step.

"Isn't Marie-Louise coming?"

"She is a goose," replied André, taking the reins when Bertha had comfortably settled herself by his side.

"She says she doesn't know these people. . . . I adore that hat—what a heavenly day!"

A slight breeze fanned Bertha's face, and she felt as happy as an escaped prisoner as she rocked gently from side to side in the sunlight.

"Do you think we shall see the father?"

"I hope so: I want to see him; I love seeing celebrated men."

"Is he a barrister?"

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“ Yes, a very big one.”

Bertha, suddenly realising that she would probably meet M. Pacaris, would have liked to turn back from an adventure that all at once seemed imprudent, perhaps momentous ; whilst André, his hands in thick leather driving-gloves, rather worn with the reins, pointed out La Picauderie near a clump of trees.

Although he hated getting letters, M. Pacaris went every morning at eleven o'clock into the park to wait for the postman. He never left the grounds during the summer. His neck had grown fat, and he tried to keep his collar from hurting him by holding it out with one finger ; here, in the country, his tall figure and clean-shaven face had taken on a robust plumpness.

Albert went up to his father, and pointing out Bertha and André, murmured :

“ These are the friends I told you about . . . cousins of the Quatrefages.”

M. Pacaris looked at Bertha, and holding himself very erect, offered André his huge hand.

“ Have you seen the postman, young man ? ”

“ No, monsieur,” said André easily, “ I have not seen the postman, but there are so many cross-roads. A hedge might have concealed him.”

“ No,” interrupted M. Pacaris, fixing André with his piercing eyes, “ the postman's route is undeviating ; he takes the by-road from Pont-Sauvatre as far as Saint Hilaire, and from there follows the high road.”

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"I had a much more poetical idea of a country postman," laughed André. "What beautiful trees. This is my first visit here."

M. Pacaris' glance fell upon his rosette of the Legion of Honour and his shabby trousers; he found this frank young man a little disconcerting.

Albert came up to Bertha.

"You see the garden is not kept up; but there are some charming nooks; we have a tennis-court as well; unfortunately only the wire fencing remains. I expected you yesterday morning, you know." They walked off together. "I certainly told André Wednesday, but I concluded the thunderstorm had frightened you. It did not rain here. This morning, just as I was going to do some work, I saw your heliotrope dress in the carriage. How fortunate that Marie-Louise did not come. André seems to get on very well with my father. Look at them; they are hob-nobbing like old friends . . . that boy is quite wonderful."

"Your father is rather frightening. I hope he does not think it extraordinary of me to come here?"

"It's perfectly natural. . . . I'll make it all right."

"We must leave at eleven-thirty," said Bertha, turning to André. "What time is it?"

"Why you've only just come. See, here is the kitchen garden; it has not grown any vegetables for five years; but in the season this

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border of pinks is delicious. Do you like figs ? There are one or two at the top of the tree. I will climb up the ladder. . . . You are not sorry you came ? ”

“ No, indeed ! I’m quite happy, but I think we ought to go back to André.”

“ We will go back this way. I have so often wandered along here, thinking of you.”

Albert stopped short :

“ Let me look at you—I love you ; that is all I have to say. You must not think too much about it . . . one is never sure. I think you are lovely. . . . I really mean it. I thought if you came here we could talk to each other, and now that we are alone I hardly dare speak to you.”

They passed through an avenue of hornbeams and Bertha walked slowly, fixing her eyes on the sandy soil. Although she was in this unfamiliar garden she felt quite safe with Albert. His tender, serious voice made her feel she could follow him anywhere.

They came up behind the château.

“ My father and André are on the terrace,” said Albert. “ Shall we go through the house ? You must see the chimney-piece in the dining-room . . . here it is ! ” he said, taking a grape from the carved oak sideboard. “ It is a fine chimney-piece. I won’t show you the drawing-room ; it is like the one at Fondebaud ; the staircase is magnificent, isn’t it ? Follow me,” he continued, preceding her up the staircase. “ These corridors are never-ending. All this is

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merely huge, not beautiful. . . . My own room," said Albert, throwing open a door and closing it quickly. "My father's room; the lock is curious—all the doors are very solid—there is a staircase by which we can climb the tower." He sat for a moment upon a chest but got up again and they traversed more passages, opened doors, went down below to see the vaulted roof in the cellar, full of mysterious shadows; they walked hastily, as if pursued.

"You think we are lost," said Albert, "but that light you see is in the hall. I hope you were not chilly in the cellar?"

"No, thank you," said Bertha, in a low voice. "We didn't stay long enough."

Albert stood still and looked at her; both remained motionless for a moment, as if waiting for something.

"Are you quite sure you were not cold?" he inquired, taking Bertha's hand, and touching her arm, "this dress is so thin."

Lowering his eyes, he added hesitatingly, in a changed voice, "So pretty; it is charming. Let me kiss you."

He passed his arm behind Bertha's shoulder; she remained motionless, taken unawares by the closeness of his intense masculine passion. Her eyes closed as he kissed her. Then she was set free, and they went quickly towards the entrance, side by side, the whole length of the corridor, without speaking a word.

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Mme. Ducroquet had invited a large party to lunch for Antoinette's birthday. It was raining, and the dining-room, with its deeply recessed narrow windows, was very dark.

"Oh ! here comes the light !" cried M. Ducroquet when a cake, lighted by twenty candles, was placed in front of Antoinette.

"What a lovely cake !" exclaimed Mme. Chaurant, in her deep voice. All the guests fixed their eyes on the circle of little flames which lit up Antoinette's rosy face.

Seated between Emma and Lucie, Albert glanced discreetly at Bertha across the long table ; but she did not look at him during the repast.

Followed by Edward and Roger, M. Ducroquet went into the smoking-room, whilst Bertha entered the billiard-room and looked at the rows of books on the walls. Albert, who was watching her from the little sitting-room, rejoined her.

"I see you have not forgiven me," he said gently. "You mustn't be angry with me. . . . I am going away this week. Are we going to part like this ?" He leaned against the billiard-table close to Bertha.

"Are you going to be unkind to me ? Tell me that you will think no more about it—do answer me ; I am afraid of someone coming," he said, going quickly to the open door, and then returning.

"Tell me—are we enemies ?"

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Bertha smiled. The man she had hated after the scene at La Picauderie had disappeared, and the remembrance of a momentary fright was effaced by his humility and affection.

"How good you are!" he cried, taking her hand.

She allowed him to clasp it, surprised to find herself caring so much for someone she hardly knew.

"This is wrong," she said to herself, remembering La Picauderie, but she thought of his approaching departure, which would bring their acquaintance to an end.

Albert peeped through the open door; Emma was still sitting in the little sitting-room with Mme. Ducroquet, and he returned quickly to Bertha and once more took her hand.

"Can't we see each other in Paris?" he entreated.

"No!" replied Bertha, drawing away her hand in alarm.

"Why? I don't often see the Quatrefages. Raymond is a friend of mine, but he is never at home."

"No."

"You say no, because I am here, but when I have gone perhaps you will be sorry."

"No," said Bertha, with an obstinate little shake of the head.

"Your flat is on the first floor; you look out of the window sometimes. I shall pass the house at six o'clock."

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“ It is the drawing-room which faces the street—I am never there in the evening.”

“ Well, don’t forget that I shall certainly be there at six o’clock.”

Laurent entered the room, and Albert said in a loud voice, taking up a billiard cue, “ You must look out at six o’clock. The sun sets at six o’clock in October, doesn’t it, Laurent ? ”

CHAPTER III

BEFORE going to his own room at six o'clock, M. Pacaris often stopped to have a chat on politics or literature with his secretary, Vagnière, who, brisk and obsequious, hung on his master's words, and usually foresaw his opinion on any subject. When M. Pacaris had gone, Vagnière smilingly descended the stairs. Albert remained seated at his table, trying to read, but his thoughts reverted to Ensenat, his dearest friend, whom he expected that evening. He rose and went into the library, listening for the door-bell. He walked restlessly into the dining-room, looked at the bottle of wine he had placed on the sideboard in the afternoon, returned to the library, again passed through the dining-room, then flung himself into a chair, straining his ears for the sound of the bell. At last Hugot's voice sounded in the ante-room, and he opened the door and saw Ensenat.

"That's all right," said he, taking him by the arm in a friendly way.

Ensenat walked discreetly into the library.

"My train only arrived at five-thirty."

"You have been at Crouans?"

Their mutual look was full of content, though their greeting was cool and almost silent, and

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the pleasure of true companionship possessed and warmed them as they poured out to one another the events of the past summer, their inmost thoughts, their hopes and fears.

“Is your father dining with us?” inquired Ensenat.

“He is dining with the Dubrocas. He goes out a great deal now, you know. He and my mother were inseparable, and he hates being alone.”

Ensenat sat down near the lamp, which shone upon his hair, shaded his face with one hand and fixed his eyes affectionately on Albert. A vague feeling of shyness kept him silent, but the two men understood one another. They had been close friends since boyhood.

“I have not seen Castagné again,” said Albert, with one hand on Ensenat’s shoulder, as he led him into the dining-room.

“He is always head over ears in love. You know Hélène, don’t you?”

“No, but Quatrefage told me about her. She’s the daughter of a painter. He met her in Germany.”

“Do you remember our arrival at Frankfort?” said Albert.

“Your purse!” laughed Ensenat, who always ate very slowly, as if he were not hungry.

They exchanged a smile at this recollection.

“Castagné was not with us at Frankfort; he met us at Bonn,” said Albert, refusing the dish Hugot offered him, without taking his eyes

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off Ensenat. "We don't see anything of him now."

"That's true. The years pass so quickly. One ought to keep a note of dates ; memories have no dates."

"That wine is from Haut-Brion-Larrivet," said Albert, watching Ensenat help himself carefully.

"At the age of eighteen, Castagné had plenty of ability. I have not read anything of his for a long time. I suppose he has retired into private life. That is to say, if he is not too much engrossed by his young lady."

"He had talent, but he may have lost it."

"I fancy his money will spoil his determination. Without that, one is a victim to other things."

"Yes," said Albert, "other things."

Disjointed phrases satisfied them ; they did not attempt to thrash out any special subject ; each man seemed to divine the thoughts of the other.

"My dear fellow," said Ensenat, rising from the table, "I must go home to bed. The long journey has made me stupid."

"I will go with you," said Albert energetically, without realising that his evening was spoilt. They followed the boulevard Saint Germain, now dark and empty ; a motor-car was just starting, hooting loudly.

"I intend to go in for law," said Ensenat.

Albert took his friend's arm and questioned

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him. But Ensenat dropped the subject, as it only concerned himself. In front of Ensenat's house, Albert said : " You've got a pretty concierge."

" Good old Cornefer has gone," said Ensenat, leaning against the door ; then, without shaking hands, they bade one another good-night.

Iron shutters were being unrolled in front of a shop, and a crowd of workpeople passed down the street. " These women," thought Albert, " have been too much pursued to be easily run down, and why bother with them ? A woman, after she has been undressed, offers no new sensation." He remembered a certain flower-girl in the Rue Vaneau. " One might seek a change every day, but then the chase would become as dull as the capture." He crossed the Saints-Pères bridge and followed the Avenue de l'Opéra. Passers-by became fewer and fewer, until at last there was nobody under the high electric lights. He looked up at the clock on the church of the Trinité.

" Really this city drives one to drop in anywhere. Shall I try the Antoine Theatre ? No, I don't want to see one of those disconcerting foreign plays."

After farther wandering, he entered a brilliantly lighted theatre, full of tobacco smoke. Leaning back in his seat, without attending to the play, he was lulled by a second-rate orchestra—his thoughts far from his surroundings.

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Albert, denying himself the pleasure of seeing his friends, shut himself up in his rooms for three weeks. His nerves needed a rest. Then one day he went out and mingled with the crowd in the boulevards. He thought he saw Mme. de Solanet in a watchmaker's shop, and turned back. It was six by the clock in the shop, and he said to himself :

"Little Bertha is perhaps looking out for me."

The Dégouys lived in a detached white house at the end of a quiet avenue. There were two lighted windows on the first floor.

"That must be the drawing-room," Albert concluded, as he entered the little hall lined with mirrors. He asked the concierge for Mme. Dégouy.

"On the first floor, monsieur."

"Is mademoiselle at home ? "

"She has just come in, monsieur."

He ascended the stairs, and stopping before Mme. Dégouy's door, he heard the sound of a piano, without being able to tell whether it came from this flat or the one above. Two people came down the stairs talking ; whereupon Albert went down into the street and looked up at the window again.

Bertha would know that he was there ; she would surely appear on the balcony or come out to him. He caught sight of a dark street close at hand, and said to himself, "That will do for us."

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He looked at a clock with an illuminated dial, under a tree, and felt inclined to go home.

"I shall not stay later than half-past six," he determined.

He stood for a time rooted to the spot, but impatience and faint-heartedness and hunger compelled him to move. He bought a few lozenges at a chemist's, and returned to look up at the lighted windows, eating his lozenges quickly, almost greedily. A feverish buzzing in his ears, and the nervous tension induced by standing there in stupefied fascination, kept him from thinking. With a vacant mind, he fixed his eyes on the window. Then he began to imagine what might be happening.

"Mme. Dégouy has an engagement. Bertha is waiting for her to go out."

All at once he perceived a shadow behind the blind; the light went out; another window was lighted up.

"They are at dinner," he thought, and as if this reflection of a human form sufficed him for the present, he went away. Later on, thinking of this same shadow, he resolved to go back again.



"You are very late," said Mme. Dégouy, in the peevish tone she adopted when she wished to show her authority.

"It isn't late," Bertha protested.

"It is quite dark. I forbid you to go out alone

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at night ; these avenues are too dangerous. Hortense must go and fetch you after this."

"By all means if she has time, but she would be better employed in closing the shutters."

"It is quite unnecessary," argued Mme. Dégouy. "We are not overlooked here."

Bertha, annoyed that her mother weakly condoned Hortense's shortcomings, said sharply, opening the glass door on to the balcony :

"How tiresome she is ; just look, the plants are still outside. Is she going to leave them there all night ? "

The rain ceased. In a puddle, under the street-lamp, Bertha imagined she saw myriads of animalculæ.

"Are you not going to do some work ? " asked Mme. Dégouy, who was knitting close to the lamp, the rapid click of her knitting-needles contrasting with her drowsy expression.

"I can't see well this evening," she remarked after a silence, as if speaking to herself.

"Hasn't Louise come back ? I sent her to the post. Letters can be posted up to six o'clock."

"Half-past six," corrected Bertha, observing a man standing under the street lamp.

"I am not satisfied with Louise. . . . What is the matter ? " exclaimed Mme. Dégouy, suddenly disturbed by a draught which made the door rattle.

"I am bringing in the fern," Bertha replied, putting the plant on the chimney-piece. She

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sat down at the farther end of the room, as though to hide herself, for she had just recognised Albert, and was quite overwhelmed by the sudden sight of this man whom she thought she had forgotten. What did he want? In the dark, in his winter overcoat, he looked like any passer-by. She wondered whether he came to the same place every evening, and thought of his tender glances and his constant affection.



He continued to come at intervals, and as time went on Bertha boldly showed herself at the window, and even smiled as if he could distinguish her face. He remained an instant well in view under the street-lamp, hiding himself between whiles in an adjacent dark street; then reappeared under the light of the lamp.

“He wants me to go down,” Bertha told herself. “How absurd!” and when she was all alone in the drawing-room she said “No,” shaking her head. She felt quite safe and sufficiently entertained by this pantomime, but was afraid of meeting him in the street. She avoided Alice’s house after her classes, for fear of coming across him, and told fibs to Odette in order to prevent her from bringing them together again.

“Why are you always looking out of the window?” asked Mme. Dégouy.

“I am looking at the rain.” Bertha knew there was very little chance of seeing Albert that evening, but could not take her eyes off

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the street. He had not been there for a month. Every night, on leaving the window, she said to herself, "I won't look out any more." She wished to forget him ; it did not seem difficult, but the following evening, when the rooms became dark, night cast its spell over her, and again she looked out of the window thinking, "Perhaps he is ill."

A carriage stopped before the house ; Albert got out, and standing under the street-lamp, raised his eyes to the window. Bertha, her heart throbbing at the sight of this human shadow in the night, under an umbrella, could not resist a sign of recognition. He had never before come so early.

"Perhaps he has something important to tell me. Why don't I go down ? I shouldn't have thought it so extraordinary to speak to him at Noizic."

This idea, hitherto dismissed as impossible, suddenly appeared quite simple, and running on tip-toe to put on her hat she noiselessly opened the hall door, leaving it ajar behind her.

Albert was gazing at the window when he became aware of Bertha beside him ; he moved away from the street-lamp and glided under her umbrella.

"Come closer to the wall . . . in this dark corner. Here you are at last ! What rain !" he said, clasping the girl's wet hand.

"I can't stay," she faltered.

The noise of the trickling rain enveloped

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them. Pressed close to Albert, Bertha felt his sudden sweet kiss and disappeared. She dwelt in fancy for a moment on this furtive embrace but did not turn back.

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Albert turned the corner of the street and waited for her, saying quickly and quietly, as soon as she came up to him, "You see this street is quite deserted. This is the place for us to meet. Yes, I have thought of everything. I have had time to think things over. I was sure you would have pity on me."

"Mother may be coming back in a minute."

"No doubt we are imprudent. I hope no one saw me in front of your house. Listen to me," he continued, taking her arm, while they walked along,

"I must have a good look at you ; I don't recognise you in these furs."

Bertha was incapable of saying a word, though she had spent the whole evening in repeating over and over again speeches prepared for this meeting.

"Does it bother you very much to come out at this time of night ? I am busy the whole day, but I might manage to escape for a moment in the afternoon, if I were certain of seeing you ; we must arrange a time. Have you a friend about here ? Of course I don't mean Odette. I was thinking rather of a school friend. I don't know what is easiest for you ; it is for you to tell me,

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but you say nothing. Do you go alone to your classes ? ”

“ No, it is impossible.” But he insisted, suggesting plans.

“ It is quite impossible,” Bertha repeated.

“ I don’t understand you,” he said, drawing away his arm. “ I have been waiting for you three whole months ; at last you appear and then you want to leave me. I suppose I am nothing to you ? ”

Bertha was taken aback by this cold, abrupt tone, and feared she had hurt him.

“ I shall see you at Noizic,” she said.

“ I shall not go back to Noizic if you continue to be what you are at present, changeable and undecided. You make a fool of me. If you really wish it we won’t meet again. I swear that I will not return to Noizic. My father must go there alone. My destination will be the Pyrenees.”

“ But of course we can see each other at Noizic.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ We can see each other just the same as before.”

“ By the tennis-court ? Between Marie-Louise and Laurent ? No, certainly not. I shall not go to the Ducroquets again.”

“ What do you want me to do then ? ”

“ Listen to me,” he said in a kinder tone, taking her arm again. “ You are perfectly free at Noizic. After lunch your brother-in-law goes out ; the others go to sleep. Behind your garden there is a road leading to Saint Hilaire. . . .”

CHAPTER IV

ON certain days in the summer, when the sea breeze dies down, the sun burns at Noizic as fiercely as in Africa. Seated in an armchair, Mme. Dégouy leant her head back and said to her son-in-law :

“ I am so sorry for you, Edward, having to go out directly after luncheon in this heat.”

“ Ah ! business,” said Edward, sticking a stamp on an envelope, his straw hat under his arm.

Mme. Dégouy turned to her daughter : “ I hope you have closed the shutters in your room.”

“ Yes,” said Bertha, without raising her eyes from the book on her lap. The light that filtered in through the closed venetian blinds accentuated the shade and coolness of the drawing-room. Mme. Dégouy stifled a yawn under the newspaper she held in her hand, then rose, as if pre-occupied with some domestic affair, crossed the dining-room and went up to her room, gently shutting the door behind her.

Emma now came into the drawing-room, replaced her sewing in the work-basket and spoke to Bertha, who still kept her eyes fixed on her book :

“ You mustn’t make a noise upstairs ; the children are asleep. I have left their door open that they may get some air.”

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Emma went upstairs again ; her steps could be heard on the floor above, and then silence reigned.

Putting down her book, Bertha waited a moment before crossing the tiled hall, in her white shoes, into the dark billiard-room. She put on a hat trimmed with daisies, arranged the ribbon at her waist before the mirror, and without making the slightest sound went to the staircase and listened. All was still. Only the Gascon accent of Victorine and a clatter of knives and forks could be heard faintly from the basement. She went out by the garden door, and was blinded by brilliant sunshine on emerging suddenly from the shaded house. The dazzling white road obliged her to shut her eyes and the heat burned her cheeks. She took the Saint Hilaire road between the hedges, crossed the bed of a stream and followed an open path which led up a little hill shaded by pine trees, then she sat down by a tall tuft of broom, and rubbing her moist hands with her handkerchief, she opened a book she had brought with her.

From time to time she looked up. The trees were motionless in the glorious sunlight, and her eyes fell upon a little white house with a garden full of large yellow blossoms where a woman was working among the flower-beds. Bertha knew that this woman saw her but did not recognise her ; she had never visited this spot before, and it seemed to her like a strange country.

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At the turn of the road Albert caught sight of the white dress among the pines.

"You didn't get home too late," he asked anxiously, taking Bertha's arm. "I hope I didn't keep you too long the day before yesterday?"

They crossed a meadow and came to a clump of trees.

"We shall be all right here," said the young man, sitting down. "If anyone comes I shall disappear behind these bushes and you must go on reading." He raised himself to stretch out his cramped leg and sat down again by Bertha's side.

"One imagines it is comfortable sitting on the grass, but the pleasure is over-rated; one has to change one's position continually. . . . It worries you when I touch your hands, because you are so hot. Never mind! I like this little bracelet and that fine chain round your neck—these pretty little bits of jewellery. That is an elephant hanging from your bracelet. Yes, an elephant, a tiny bell, a little shoe. . . ."

He passed his arm round Bertha, pressed her to him and shut his eyes for some minutes; an ardent silence enveloped them. When at length he withdrew his arm he saw that Bertha's eyes were open and calmly studying him; all at once she disengaged herself and moved away.

"How hot it is!" cried Albert, pushing back a lock of hair from his forehead. "You see we are quite safe here. We were very imprudent to sit just in front of a house. I thought of that

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yesterday. I also thought I had better go to Fondebaud again ; it is more than a month since I saw the Ducroquets ; I shall go on Thursday—try and come too.”

“ Thursday ? ” said Bertha, looking at an insect in the yellow moss. “ If the Chaurants are going to Fondebaud I could go with them.”

“ Has Marie-Louise ever said anything to you about anyone suspecting us ? ”

“ No,” replied Bertha, separating the grass where the tiny animal was trying to run away. “ Nobody pays any attention to us.”

“ Insects seem to interest you very much.”

“ It is a carabus beetle,” said Bertha.

“ A carabus ? How learned you are ! ”

“ I know a good many insects by name because I have always lived in the country and my brother-in-law taught me. Let’s set it free—it’s a very useful insect ; it eats caterpillars,” said Bertha, lying down on the grass.

“ What slaughter there is underneath the grass ! If the carabus took it into its head to be magnanimous we should have no more vegetables. What on earth would become of the poor vegetarians ? . . . You knew that Marie Brun was dead ? ”

“ Yes, Emma told me. She died suddenly, didn’t she ? ”

“ What a lovely woman ! Do you remember ? We must remember her, for those who follow us cannot. It is a duty to call to mind the

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beautiful faces which have gone from us. What are you thinking of, little dreamer ? ”

“ I am thinking of what you have been saying,” said Bertha, drawing nearer to Albert, who took her hand, “ I love to do that.” Suddenly, leaning against Albert, and pointing to his waistcoat, she cried roguishly, “ What a lot of pockets ! ” She took out his watch ; then putting her hand into another pocket, she found a paper which she gravely unfolded.

“ What a baby you are ! It is a tramway ticket.”

“ I always thought you threw them away too soon.”

“ On that occasion I tried to alter my ways. Leave that stupid paper alone. Give me your hands, little one.”

Once more he clasped Bertha in his arms and drew her close to him. Frightened, yielding, but with her mind clear, she felt her hair coming down ; her dress snapped and her cheeks burned against his face. Covered with shame and detesting this man for the moment, she struggled to free herself.

“ Don’t go yet ! You have not stayed nearly so long to-day.”

With downcast eyes she ran off without a word across the meadow and walked quickly along the high road, between the dust-covered hedges, trying to forget this perturbing incident, but her moist hands, burning cheeks and crumpled muslin dress all combined to keep it

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before her. At every turn of the road she expected to meet some passer-by who would question her, and pictured her family anxiously awaiting her return ; her mother strolling in the garden . . . perhaps they had even consulted Edward. . . .

Gently, in trembling dread, she opened the hall door, but all was as she had left it ; the house welcomed her with its peaceful stillness and subdued light ; the children still slept. Creeping upstairs, with eyes still dazzled by the road's white glare and smoothing her hair as she went, the truant reached her room, too tired to think, and dropped into an easy chair, pressing her throbbing temples : she rose presently and, seizing a sponge, bathed her face in cold water.

Before dinner she went to the front door and raised the outside blind ; the sun was setting, but the air that blew across the baked earth was stifling. Bertha took her little niece by the hand and went into the garden.

" You will get wet," she cried, seeing Jeanne playing near a heliotrope bush close to the water, and walked towards the kitchen garden. The sun's last rays were upon it, and old Jean, with his bare dusty feet in sabots, was watering his cherished rows of vegetables. Bertha admired the pinks, close to some artichokes, and remembered Albert's remark : " In the season this border of pinks is delicious."

She was immediately reminded of that delightful morning with Albert at La Picauderie,

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and thought of their walk on the road when he had been so charming, repeating to herself words which had thrilled her. Slowly, as if he were beside her, she dreamily gathered some of the finest pinks.

But during dinner, sitting up very straight and silent within the circle of lamplight, she had a sudden vision of that horrible embrace, and asked herself with burning shame how she could possibly love him. Edward looked at her serious face and spoke teasingly after wiping his mouth :

“ Bertha is growing up. We must soon find her a husband.”

“ Not just yet,” Bertha smiled.

She went upstairs early, undressed without a light, put on a white dressing-gown and sat down before the window. The moist flower-beds exhaled a delightful perfume in the warm, still air, and the shrill chirping of crickets sounded like tiny musical instruments in the clear starlight. Bertha had twisted her hair into a knot, but finding this too hot at the back of her neck, she rose to alter it, and in passing the mirror saw her pale profile in the darkened room and the little nosegay of pinks on the table.

“ I wonder what he is doing now,” she murmured as she sat down again by the window. He had told her he would come into their garden some evening, and she looked searchingly at the dark bushes where a tiny spark gleamed in

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the olives, illuminating Edward's face as he lit a cigar.

"Perhaps he is there," she said to herself, recalling the tone of his voice that she found so attractive. Bertha leaned out of the window and hung down her hand as though he were holding it ; she felt that this starlit night, which he also beheld, united them. She raised the sleeve of her dressing-gown to her shoulder, and saw a brown mark upon her bare arm.



One day they followed the path towards Saint Hilaire that crossed a corn-field. They walked slowly in thoughtful abstraction, their eyes fixed on the stubble that crackled under their feet. Beneath their feet the chirping of crickets stopped, to begin again farther on with accelerated vibration.

"I think," said Albert, "that very soon we shall have a reply from Vagnière. You see, I can't let my father go alone. I tried to persuade him that this business was not important but for some time past he has worried himself over trifles. We shall not come back this year, I am certain."

They stopped under a nut-tree.

"We can't leave one another so quickly. It seems to me we have hardly said a word yet and that I hardly know you. We must write to each other." Then he continued, with studied carelessness, "Ask Marie-Louise to write your

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address on some envelopes, and then give them to me."

" Marie-Louise ? "

" I say Marie-Louise because she is here on the spot and you can ask her easily. It is true that the letter will have the Paris postmark. Is your mother very observant ? "

" Mother never looks at any of my letters, not even at the envelopes."

" Blessed be confidence ! Splendid ! It is much better for mothers not to suspect."

CHAPTER V

ON his arrival in Paris, Albert heard through the Quatrefages that Castagné's mistress had left him two months previously, and he went to see his friend as soon as possible after hearing this news. Walking quickly, and smiling to himself, he thought: "At last he has got rid of Hélène. How could he care for her? He may be as acute as you please, but he never found out the foolishness and lies of that flighty woman."

But on arriving at the luxurious flat it occurred to Albert that Castagné might be more unhappy than relieved, and he assumed a suitable expression of sympathy.

"Is M. Castagné at home?" he asked the servant in a low voice. Castagné wore green and white striped pyjamas, and his bare feet were in slippers.

"Oh! it's you," he cried joyfully, "I thought I recognised your ring. Come into my study, my bedroom is all upset. It's disgraceful! I am neither dressed nor shaved. The morning goes so extraordinarily quickly. I can't imagine how anyone finds time to work. Seriously, how can people do anything of importance, or study any subject and manage to wash themselves properly every day? What do you think? I have made up my mind to learn English. This

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summer I remembered the sound of a verse of Longfellow's. My father used to repeat it to me when I was a child. I don't know what it means, but the words are so musical ; I like it without understanding it."

Leaning on the arm of his chair, his visitor turned over the leaves of an English grammar, without looking at Castagné.

"For the last two months I have worked like a school-boy," Castagné continued, smiling ; "I have two lessons a week. Quatrefage wanted me to go to Saint Malo."

In mentioning Quatrefage's name, Castagné, catching Albert's eye, sat down at his writing-table and became grave and silent. After a pause he said .

"Of course, Quatrefage has told you ? It is all over."

Albert's reply was gentle and hesitating :

"I know she wrote to you."

"Yes ; a very frank letter." Castagné turned to Albert : "If anyone had told me three months ago that I should be sitting here, looking at this armchair, and that she would never come back any more . . . !"

He looked wretched, and relapsed once more into silence, but continued after a few moments : "Something is happening that I couldn't have imagined possible—that I couldn't have dreamt would come to pass. . . . I am still here, talking to you. . . . I have lived through it all. . . . Do you understand ? How strange it is !"

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Albert made no reply, but looked searchingly and very kindly at his friend.

Castagné went on : “ If one didn’t believe in some sort of future compensation for present unhappiness one couldn’t bear to live through such sorrow.” He got up, his face brightening, and went on as though in need of unburdening himself : “ We try to imagine ourselves in the grip of an imaginary sorrow, but we cannot succeed in this because one can never feel the sorrows of a person one does not know ; we become different beings in sorrow. We think it would be dreadful to lie absolutely still, with one leg in plaster of Paris, but if we have a broken leg, this treatment gives immense relief. When Hélène wrote me that letter ; when I knew everything, she seemed a different person, a stranger. For a time I almost ceased to exist. . . .”

He sat down and continued earnestly : “ I won’t say that ; it is not quite true. One of the strangest things in life is the consolation one finds in the midst of grief. The woman who once loved me and whom I adored in the days when she was faithful to me, still survives—I am certain of it ; even in her farewell letter there was, here and there, a note of fidelity in which I recognised her true self. She too has suffered, I thought, and I read her letter over again, and understood it. She seemed to me tender and noble. I thought she would come back to me ; then, after a while, I understood

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. . . Still, there was her disappearance into the unknown ; that miserable night when I lost heart completely, and which now seems a blank. . . . That reminds me of something your friend Natie said to me, ' Death kills passion in the lover who survives. Before a corpse love has no more sustenance.' "

" I think that is only true of sensual love," said Albert.

" There is no other love worthy of the name, old chap ; there is no love without a basis of sensuality. Yes, yes, I know ; admiration, tenderness, union of souls—love is manufactured out of all that—but it is the love of withered hearts."

" That is not absolutely true."

" You be quiet !" said Castagné, smiling. " You don't know anything about it. You are not temperamental, are you ? You are an icicle."

" It is true that an exacting mistress would frighten me," said Albert, rising and patting Castagné's shoulder. Then he added with a smile :

" I am glad to find you the same as ever ; a moment ago I was admiring your broad outlook and your cold psychological analysis of your own feelings. You were not made for love—you are too intelligent."

" You're wrong there," Castagné said, frowning to conceal the smile of satisfaction which gleamed in his eyes.

" I have occasionally spoken to Quatrefage,"

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Albert continued, "about your passion ; but to you I speak more plainly, for you are a friend. People talked of you as though you were an invalid ; it was tragic."

"What do you mean ?"

"I mean what we have known for some time past, and what you yourself know now, that you loved a woman who was unworthy of you. I have met her. One day you were under the impression she was coming back from Aix, but no such thing ; we travelled in the same train and she got into the carriage at Angoulême."

"At Angoulême ?" Castagné repeated in a low voice, and looked stonily out of the window, his teeth set, while he grasped the edge of the table to steady himself under the shock of this revelation.

He repeated "Angoulême !" then said, "No ! She was always truthful ; she never deceived me. I am sure of it. You didn't know her . . . she was perfectly straight and open-minded ; she could not lie. That is why she left me. She met a man who unsettled her ; she thought herself lost ; she was afraid of being deceitful—and then, all at once, she left me. She had too much liberty. She went out alone, and had no home. One ought not to give women too much liberty. You see, the thing is to marry the woman you love and take care of her ; protect her from all comers, from friends, from all eyes."

"She might come back," said Albert, trying to temper the blow he had dealt his friend, and

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which had already left its mark on his face. "She was afraid. When she knows you have forgiven her she will come back to you : you will forget."

"I don't think she will come back," said Castagné.

"Do you know where she is ?"

"No !" said Castagné, and he fell into an abstracted silence.

♦ ♦ ♦

Although he detested taking exercise, Castagné allowed Albert to take him to tennis at the Quatrefages'.

"You have no racquet," cried Odette, without interrupting her game.

"I shall not play to-day, I'll watch," said Albert as he sat down on a bench close to a hut where the players kept their shoes. He got up again to introduce Castagné to Bertha.

"Are you not going to play, mademoiselle ?"

"I would rather sit still," Bertha replied.

"Little Mercédès will amuse you," said Albert, in a low voice, turning to Castagné ; "she's a clever little thing."

Speaking to Bertha in a ceremonious tone, he said, "You must introduce me to the Roqueberts," and with the same respectful manner, he whispered, "You wrote me a splendid letter."

He walked all round the tennis-court, by the high wire fencing, then approached Bertha, and said, picking up a ball which he threw to the players :

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"It is strange to find you again at a tennis-party, just as at Fondebaud. I feel as if I had known you a long time—four years, I believe. Do you remember the first time I saw you? I was walking with M. Ducroquet."

Bertha, who was preparing to play, put one foot up on the seat to tie her shoe-lace.

"Listen!" said Albert, sitting down near her, "I shan't come here again. Strangers bore me. I shall wait for Noizic, and content myself with your letters. But it is a long time—all the dreary winter days, all the spring. . . ."

Bertha turned her head towards Odette, and Albert went on.

"I think it will be quite easy for us to see each other in the way I have suggested."

Bertha looked at Castagné as if she were not listening; then, with an air of unconcern, she whispered distinctly:

"Come to the square on Tuesday at six o'clock."

♦ ♦ ♦

Albert waited for Bertha at the crossing of some narrow, deserted streets, and soon caught sight of her as she passed under a street lamp.

"It is cold already," he said, leading her to a seat and unfastening a button on her wrist and gently drawing off her glove.

"I hope you aren't cold?" he went on, pressing the hand he was holding under his coat. "Winter is unkind to lovers."

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He had noticed Bertha's calm air of self-possession as she approached him, and in his anxiety he said abruptly :

"We are very naughty—or rather, I am. And I have no excuse. One day we must part. You'll have to forget me. Perhaps you will regret these moments we have spent together."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that later on when we are obliged to leave each other, I shall stand in the way of your happiness if you still love me."

"Don't bother yourself about me."

He put his arm round her and drew her to him.

A man followed by a child walked past them on the pavement. Hidden by a dark shadow, they kept silence until he was out of earshot.

"He didn't see us," said Albert. "What have you been doing to-day? Have you come from Alice Bonifas, or have you been to a class this afternoon? And now you are going home. Will you work in your bedroom before dinner? I should like to go home with you. Describe your evening to me."

"It wouldn't interest you. Mother will say to me: 'You are very late.' I shall reply: 'I am no later than usual.' Then it will be time for dinner."

"You wrote me a charming letter about your mother. I know how difficult it is to get on with one's relations. We understand them too well, at least we think so. They should not be judged

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too harshly, and ought to be loved a little blindly, because we might be mistaken about them."

"You are good."

"No !"

"Yes, you are," said Bertha, pressing his hand, and trying to see his face in the darkness.

"Believe me, I am not good. If I were, instead of preaching filial piety to you I should tell you to hurry home and never come back to see me any more. Men try to hide their weaknesses by words. We must realise now that we are doing wrong. Presently you will be telling fibs. You're going to have a bad conscience because you believe we love one another, but I, who have never loved anyone before, do not love you in the way you imagine, and there are some subtle delusions between us. All that is bad ; we must admit that good judgment and clear vision are most important. To lead your mind astray would be a great—an irreparable—evil. You have an uncommon mind, which I love dearly. I don't want to spoil it ; nothing else matters. I shall always be honest with you, and we will talk about life. I will teach you how to look at it. No one ever speaks frankly about life to little girls. . . . I am sure you must be cold," he exclaimed suddenly, and clasping her in his arms as if to warm her, he pressed her face to his. Bertha immediately put her handkerchief to her mouth to wipe away his kiss, and struggled out of his embrace.

"I will go with you as far as the corner of

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your avenue," said Albert. "No one will recognise you in the shadow of this wall," and he watched her disappear into the darkness.

On re-entering the house, Bertha found Mme. Quatrefage with her mother in the drawing-room, so she sat down and took off her gloves, which she put into her muff. She talked a great deal, in a lively, gracious manner, to Mme. Quatrefage, whilst Mme. Dégouy's glance followed her daughter's every movement.

"You have just come back from your class?" inquired Mme. Quatrefage, looking closely at the young girl. "Are you working hard?"

"She tires herself to death," said Mme. Dégouy, without removing her admiring eyes. "She eats nothing."

"That is like Mercédès," said Mme. Quatrefage.

"I am very well," said Bertha, getting up.

In her room, looking critically at herself in the glass, she was shocked at her paleness, and saw that her eyes were unnaturally large and bright. She seemed to be looking into the face of a stranger.

She took the lamp from the table and putting it on the chest of drawers, drew up an easy chair close to the fire and took off her hat, keeping it on her knee for a moment. She thought of Albert and the sound of his voice. How delightful it had been to be with him! If only he were with her now! She would love to listen to him again, and knew he would always enjoy talking to her.

♦ ♦ ♦

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Bertha saw a good deal of Odette in December ; they worked together trimming Mme. de Vidar's Christmas tree, had tea in the dining-room, where wreaths were heaped up on the carpet, and often when Blanche Célerier or Yvonne Dubroca arrived at four o'clock, the two were engrossed in an animated conversation.

One day Blanche repeated a remark of Mme. de Solanet's about Albert, and Odette said :

" Albert is a proud, unfeeling man ; he can't excuse human weakness ; he is not good-natured, and, like all thick-skinned people, he occasionally shows want of tact. What do you say, Bertha ? "

" I don't know enough about him," replied Bertha, without raising her eyes ; she stuck some gold paper on a walnut, and added, " I think he is a cynic."

She would not defend Albert before these people who so grossly misunderstood him, but smiled with downcast eyes, happy in the thought that she was the only one who knew his true nature—generous, noble and sympathetic.

On several occasions during a hard frost, Bertha went skating with Blanche Célerier and some new friends of Mercédès : Alex Soubirant, whom Albert dubbed " le Soupirant " (the lover), and the two Pascals ; she also joined some dancing-classes organised by Mme. Célerier, and went to Mme. Fontane's parties with the Quatrefages. She was very popular ; people seemed to admire her. This success in

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society, and the compliments men paid her, made life a delight, confirming the praises Albert had secretly bestowed upon her, and appearing also to confirm the wisdom of her love.

A conversation with acquaintances, a new dress, the streets, a book—everything interested her now. The thought of Albert tinged her whole existence. When she re-read his letters or played the piano dreamily, she felt his presence in the vacant house.

Bertha's mother depressed her, but she tried to give more affection in return for a maternal love that was contented with so little. She also tried to do more for others. At the Bonifas' she chatted with the grandmother, went out with Alice who had so few pleasures, took her for walks, to museums and exhibitions, and often ended these days by tea taken in Bertha's room, out of a tiny tea-pot, to an accompaniment of jokes and laughter. Occasionally she copied Albert's way of speaking, and Alice would then notice a sharp decisive manner and slightly sententious tone, which she merely attributed to a slight affectation.

Bertha told no one of her cherished intimacy with Albert, and she neither reproached herself nor admitted that she was deceitful. How could she think there was anything wrong in what made her so happy, or doubt this love which filled her life with the joy of life and awakened unsuspected virtues in her?

♦ ♦ ♦

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Bertha noticed that the little street was somehow different, and saw that the lamps had not yet been lighted ; she glanced towards a seat under the trees, walked round the square, followed an alley, and then retraced her steps. He was late again. This waiting humiliated her.

“ I feel so guilty walking about here. I will never come again,” she said to herself as she entered the square again, torn between a longing to see her lover and the desire to go away. Then all at once she heard, “ I’m so sorry. I see you are cross with me ! ” and Albert took her arm. “ My father detained me, and you do really believe that I work hard, don’t you ? ”

“ It isn’t safe to wait for you here. Very soon it will be light at six ; we are too near our house. I thought I recognised our stationer just now—she might easily walk down this street.”

“ Listen to me ! ” said Albert, leading her to a seat. “ I have an idea. I quite agree—this is not the place for us to meet. I have thought of something much better. We might see each other at Castagné’s flat.”

“ At Castagné’s flat ? What madness ! ”

“ Wait a moment. Don’t be so alarmed. I have asked Castagné to give up his flat to me for an hour from time to time. Of course he will not be there himself. He goes out every day regularly at four o’clock. I told him I wanted to meet an unsociable lady ; I invented an extraordinary story. It is quite simple, I assure you, for he’s going to let his servants go out that day.

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The idea pleases his romantic soul. You must cross the entrance-hall without asking any questions ; nobody will know where you are going. You can take the lift—No ! You had better go up the stairs—two flights. I shall be there, and you won't even have to ring." Then, to reassure her, he added :

" Naturally we can't meet there very often, and of course Castagné will never know you have been there," Albert cried impatiently, when Bertha refused to be persuaded. " Surely you can believe me. You are unkind to-day. Did you go back to the Peyrecaves ? " he asked in a gentler tone, but without smiling. " What has the Soupirant got to say for himself ? "

" He is charming and very intelligent."

" I hear you looked lovely at the Céleriers. Mme. Boissonade told me. I had no idea you knew the Boissonades. Do you like dancing ? I suppose you were surrounded by silly asses."

He took up a book Bertha had laid on the seat.

" Castagné has a splendid library. You are reading a book I don't care for," he said, stroking the leather cover. " Did you make this cover yourself ? "

" Blanche gave it me."

" The style and the psychology are both bad. These inferior books produce a false excitement. I should like you to read some books of my choosing," Albert said reflectively, " real books." Then he added, " I dare not send them to you, but I could bring them to Castagné's. You could

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easily take them from there. You see, if we try to see each other, even at the other end of Paris, in daylight, your stationer might happen to meet us."



Albert failed to persuade Bertha, and on the following Saturday they returned to the same meeting-place. That morning she had been shopping with her mother; she was nervous, and could not control her irritability with Mme. Dégouy's indecision, slowness, and want of method. She felt worn out and vexed with herself when the time came to meet Albert.

"Do let me sit down," she said to him, but the seat was wet, and they continued walking, now in the dark spaces of the square, then in patches of light under the lamps. Bertha leaned heavily on Albert's arm, and her fur felt damp against her neck. The dullness of her home, to which she must return, her dislike of these streets, her remorse and restlessness, together with the chilly night air, brought her to the verge of tears, in spite of her happiness in Albert's company. In the rue Lecourbe, full of people and of noisy traffic, he exclaimed, "What a dismal place! We really can't go on with this vagabond existence. You are tired out, and it is going to rain. Let's go to Castagné's—I know he is out. He has given me the key of the flat."

Mechanically, and vaguely indifferent to everything, she allowed him to take her there.

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In the taxi she leant her head against his shoulder, and closed her eyes.

"I will go in first," said Albert, leaning out of the window to look up and down the street. "You wait five minutes, then come in boldly. If by any chance you meet the concierge—I don't think you will—say you are going to see Mme. Dauzac."

Albert glanced down over the banister facing Castagné's flat ; then, having shown Bertha in, quietly shut the door and helped her off with her coat.

"Sit down there," he said gently, arranging the cushions at her back. "Lie down a little. Are you all right? Rest a little and I'll get tea ready."

He lit the spirit-lamp, put a teacup near her on a little table, turned up the lamp and again arranged the cushions.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked tenderly, and every now and then he returned to repeat the question. He found biscuits and grapes, put a log on the fire, which blazed cheerfully, poured out the tea, and drew up the table. Yes, she was very cosy in this dimly-lighted drawing-room, full of beautiful things, and she felt a new happiness in this hitherto unexperienced intimacy.

"I have some books for you," said Albert, taking Bertha's cup from her ; then he went to a table and returned with several volumes.

"*The Education of Girls* by Fénelon," said Albert, putting the book on a chair. "You must

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notice the style ; it is a thoughtful and well-written work. *Love* by Stendhal—I have brought this book as there are several pages towards the end on the subject of woman ; I have marked them. I will find you a better edition of La Rochefoucauld—with a pretty binding. You must read this little book reverently—we should be less French than we are but for him. I have chosen these at random—there are several others,” he added, going to the shelves to read the titles: “Vigny—very good! Vigny. . . . Ah! *War and Peace*, that’s splendid. *Adolphe*, *Meditations on the Gospels*. What a writer! *The Desert*. Look! I have chosen several modern books to amuse you. Musset’s *Comedies* ; he is delightfully wise. And here are some more,” he continued, bending over Bertha ; “you must read them all again after you are thirty.”

He sat on the edge of the sofa ; Bertha had on a dark dress, and her little brown hat was well down on her head. She looked a little tired but her eyes shone brightly in the lamp-light, and in them one could discern a grave happiness ; it was as though life had already matured her through intercourse with Albert.

He looked at her tenderly and put his hand on hers.

“You won’t find a very strict morality in these books. I, personally, have no principles to impose upon you ; you must follow your own. You will find here sound, and I think accurate, views on mankind. You will learn to appreciate

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a concise and sincere style, to bring a trained intelligence to bear upon the problems of life, and you will see yourself and others in a new light. You will develop sound judgment, and I am not afraid of obscuring your imagination. You must retain enough idealism to enable you to see deeply into the truth and beauty of the common things of life, as Maurisset says. At least, I shall have prevented you from reading corrupt literature ; I think cultivation of the intellect a great safeguard."

He stopped short, holding Bertha's hand in his own.

"Now we must go," he said.

She had forgotten this necessity. Why should such a perfect time ever come to an end ?

"It is raining," said Albert, bringing her coat, "and the taxi is waiting ; it will take you as far as the rue d'Audenge, which is quite near your house."

She returned home, carrying with her a clear vision of that peaceful room, and of Albert's eyes, so tenderly fixed upon her. Taking off her hat before the glass, and looking at her tired face, she thought with a throb of pleasure that he had undoubtedly more than ever shown that he loved her, though she had not looked her best.

♦ ♦ ♦

When Bertha had no afternoon lesson, except the usual class which enabled her to go out with Albert, she stayed at home doing nothing. After settling herself in her room she would take up

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some needlework ; but a peaceful occupation like this allowed her mind to concentrate the more on Albert.

* * *

Rocked by the movement of the tram, she looked at the people in the street without daring to think of her destination. He waited for her behind the open door, and drew back a step into the house, his arms stretched out towards her ; then he took both her hands, and holding her a little way off, devoured her with his eyes. He helped her with her coat, unfastening it awkwardly, and then greeted her formally :

“ Will you have some tea—No ?—how cold your hands are ! ”

Her hands were always cold on arrival, as though all her blood had rushed to her rapidly-beating heart.

“ You will be comfortable in this armchair,” he said tenderly, and she yielded to his kiss, but turned away suddenly as though unable to cope with her emotion.

“ Don’t move,” he said, keeping his lips fastened on hers, while he stroked her arm gently with one hand, as though to send that kiss vibrating through her whole being.

He rose abruptly, walked up and down the room, returned to her side, knelt at her feet, took her hand and gazed into her eyes, which seemed to have grown older—fuller of expression and experience. They remained in the same attitude, gazing into each other’s eyes for

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a long time, and when at length they moved a shy silence enveloped them.

Later on Bertha remembered that she had hardly spoken on that occasion, though she had still a great deal to tell him about herself. In his presence she could find no words ; speech seemed futile, considering their great love and their complete fusion of thought in which her one idea had been to draw closer to him.

He touched her mouth and tired eyelids delicately with little tender kisses ; then he pressed her lips long and passionately, tearing himself away at last almost roughly, to pace the room. When he returned to her side he was calmer, and again fixing his gaze upon her lustrous and expressive eyes, with dark circles beneath them, he said gently : “ What a strange being a young girl is,” and took her hand in his.

Wrapt in her own impenetrable thoughts, Bertha made no reply ; her face grew paler and her hands were limp and cold.

She went home, worn out and feverish, her nerves quivering, and went to bed directly after dinner. Half-asleep, she imagined Albert’s cheek against her own, his arms embracing her. She would like to have prolonged this reverie, but presently thought became an effort, and she fell into a deep sleep which lasted till morning.

She got up and went to her mirror. Her child-like face, with its big soft eyes, was pale but refreshed, and upon it there was an expression of calm happiness.

CHAPTER VI

MME. DÉGOUY decided to spend the summer at the seaside with Emma's children, and Bertha accepted the idea of going away for the summer without seeing Albert almost as though this freedom from him were welcome. She required time to think, to take breath as it were, after so great an experience.

At Médis, in the midst of unknown people, she was at peace ; she could forget those feverish assignations and that almost stifling love.

Every morning she bathed in the sea ; lying full length on the warm beach before entering the water, she plunged her hands in the sand and sprinkled it over her bare limbs. This diversion brought back her childhood, and for a few moments she became light-hearted as in the old days. Then, her thoughts reverting to Albert, she would jump up with a little sigh. Eleven in the morning always found her in the garden. So soon as she heard certain clocks strike she opened the door, because the postman then crossed the avenue, stopping at a house ; Bertha would meet him by a tamarisk hedge, her throat dry with impatience.

"Have you anything for us ?" was her invariable question. At length the desired letter

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came. She carried it off, devouring it hastily as she went, not caring to understand the words properly, so as not to spoil the pleasure to come. She walked out through the pine-forest into the country, postponing the joy of re-reading the precious missive until she arrived there. Her reply was written in her room at evening by candle-light ; words came to her lips and were uttered in tones so ardent that they exhausted her like crying.

Mme. Solange arrived at the end of the month, and Bertha sometimes joined her in the Berchers' tent. The moment Abrial saw her coming he ran out to search the beach for a chair.

" You take a great deal of trouble for me," Bertha would say with a coquettish smile, in which perhaps a little cruelty to the absent lover was mingled with a slight defiance, as though she wished to deny her subjection to Albert and to throw off her subjection to him.

Lily Bercher was sewing, without raising her eyes, and Bets, who had just been to an English school for a year, was trying to teach a little English to Rodolphe Bercher. He was slyly digging out the sand from underneath Gardera's seat, thus causing him to cling violently to the chair which was giving way beneath him.

" What a nuisance you are ! " he grumbled, moving farther off, without interrupting his conversation with Mdlle. Laurencin.

Bertha, who was thoroughly enjoying the fine

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weather, shut her sunshade as she came up to the tent, and glanced roguishly at Gardera's books or at Bets' pretty shoes. But her thoughts were far away from these people, and a look of weary preoccupation settled upon her face. When Gardera spoke to her she replied quietly, as though Albert were listening; she always tried to copy his reserve. It was for him that, unconsciously, she dressed herself with so much care, and she delighted in wearing his favourite frocks. She hung her hand down behind her chair as she talked, and imagined Albert's hand seizing it discreetly as at Fondebaud in a group of people.

"Let us walk to the cliff head," said Bertha suddenly one day.

All agreed, except Lily Bercher, who kept on working. Bertha went on ahead by Abrial's side. She seemed determined upon a long walk, and climbed up the cliff with great ardour; but she soon returned and went immediately to her room, as though Albert were nearer in solitude. If he were to come now, she thought, he should have such a kiss as he had never had from her. She sat down upon the edge of the bed; then she got up and stood before the long mirror, stretching out her arms towards the reflection of her pulsating body, and laid her arm against the cold glass.

♦ ♦ ♦

Albert rejoined his father at Noizic towards

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the end of September. In order to surprise Bertha, he had not warned her of his arrival. He simply wrote saying that he would meet her at Médis on the following day. She walked slowly to the spot agreed upon, rubbing her cold, damp hands with her handkerchief ; all at once she saw Albert on the road, and saw that he carried his overcoat over his arm. She was so overcome that her face became quite expressionless, and to smile at him required an effort.

“ You have brought your coat,” she remarked in a weak voice, and, raising her eyes, sought to find the man whom she had pictured while reading his last letters. His face had become a trifle blurred in her memory ; it did not now appear so handsome as she had imagined ; nevertheless, the sight of it filled her with happiness.

“ It is very hot, but this morning, at Noizic, I was afraid it was going to rain,” said Albert.

He threw down his overcoat by the side of the road.

“ Darling ! how lovely you are in white ! ” He kissed Bertha’s hands, one after the other, drawing her towards him. Laughing happily, they gazed at one another, their faces close together.

“ You are sun-burned ; it is very becoming.”

“ Let’s go down to the sea,” said Bertha quickly, while Albert held her hand. “ I want to show you where I walk every evening, but I

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am afraid of meeting the Berchers. We can go on to Talmyre beach."

The hedges were covered with dust, and across the harvested fields, scorching in the sun, one could see the shimmering blue of the sea. To avoid the beaten path through a wood, they went across the bracken, making a fresh path for themselves.

"We might stop here," said Albert.

"Just a little further," Bertha rejoined in a troubled voice, so they walked on past a vineyard, then through a pine-wood.

"Now I shall stop," said Albert, pressing her arm gently; but she turned away her head as though afraid of their silent kisses, and walked on. From a rocky promontory, exposed to the winds and burning in the sun, they saw before them a long pinkish stretch of sand, and faintly visible at its edge—the sea.

Descending to the beach, Bertha took Albert by the hand and ran with him to the top of a sand-dune; they climbed other hillocks of heaped-up sand, sprinkled with tufts of thistles, and pieces of dead wood that looked half-burnt. In the little white valleys they could no longer hear the sea or feel the breeze; here the air was warm and had a sweet aroma like the scent of sunshine. At the pine-wood Bertha sat down, unable to think of anywhere else to go; she was finally conquered by that power from which she had tried to escape, and which now encompassed her. She shut her eyes and Albert bent over her.

CHAPTER VII

CASTAGNÉ was travelling in Italy when Bertha returned to Paris, and she could no longer meet Albert at the flat, as she had done the year before. They sometimes saw each other alone for a few minutes in a cab at night, or met in some unfrequented square in daytime. There was always so much to say, but she was silenced by kisses whenever she tried to speak, and she left him more inwardly disturbed than ever. Night gave her no repose ; she would toss sleeplessly on her bed or get up, cross the parquet floor with bare feet, and following Mme. Vidar's advice, drink a glass of water in the dining-room.

"What on earth is the matter ? " cried her mother one night, having been suddenly awakened by the switching on of the electric light.

"It is only I," replied Bertha. "I am looking for your orange-flower water."

"Can't you sleep ? " Mme. Dégouy asked bewildered, raising herself on her elbow, her thin white locks smoothed flat on her head. "Wait a moment. Go back to bed ; I will bring it to you."

Dressed in a petticoat, and a shawl which she kept on her shoulders by an occasional shrug, Mme. Dégouy came into Bertha's room stirring some sweetened water.

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"You must try and sleep, darling," she said, tucking in the covers. "You must, really—you think too much; you're too absorbed in something—I have seen that for some time."

Bertha, who had never before heard her mother speak in this way, was alarmed, "I wonder how much she knows—does she know anything? I believe she does."

Mme. Dégouy then talked gently for some time on intimate delicate matters with the experience and tender solicitude of a middle-aged woman who is also a mother; the shock of being suddenly awakened seemed to quicken her sluggish intelligence and clarify the memory of her own past life, but she put her advice forth in such veiled form that Bertha hesitated to speak for fear of betraying herself. She allowed her frayed nerves to be soothed by her mother's tender voice, then shut her eyes like a tired child and sank into a calm, dreamless sleep.



One morning, coming out of the Malaval Chambers, Albert met Mme. Quatrefage.

"I have just been buying some medicine for Castagné," she said, taking a small parcel out of her muff. "It is a marvellous remedy for throat troubles."

"Is Castagné in Paris?" Albert asked.

"What! Didn't you know? He has been indoors for ten days with a dreadful throat."

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" I will go and see him," said Albert. " Shall I take him the medicine ? "

" No, thank you. I want to give it him myself. This remedy is Mercanton's secret. You might spoil its effect."

" What extraordinary solicitude ! " thought Albert, as he got into the tram for the boulevard Flandrin. " Castagné is to be envied ; she's been spoiling him for a long time. Now, why on earth doesn't he marry Odette ? "

" Come, old fellow, this won't do," he said on going into Castagné's room.

" A sore throat," rejoined Castagné in a hoarse voice, raising himself in bed.

" Don't uncover yourself," his visitor cried solicitously. " You should have told me. I see you don't want for drinks. That's splendid—drink as much as you can. Did you send for Natte ? "

" No," said Castagné, in a low voice, touching the neck of his pyjamas. " He lives too far off—I have Mercanton. I should have been more careful, but I was in a hurry to get home again."

" Don't talk. I had better go."

" No, do stay ! " said Castagné in a clearer voice. " I feel better. I shall get up in a day or two."

" Why were you in a hurry to get back ? "

" I wanted to get home. When travelling I am always thinking about the next place I am going to. I stayed a week at Palermo, three days

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at Naples, two in Rome. Here, at any rate, I do not need to move on."

"But this is like being in an hotel. Do you know what I was thinking as I came here? You ought to marry."

"Oh!" said Castagné with a wave of his hand, painfully.

"Yes, you must marry, just because you are Philip Castagné. You've got plenty of ability, but you're lazy. You need an anchor, and you have the misfortune of being rich. Marriage is a pleasant responsibility and refuge."

He leant towards Castagné speaking eagerly, and felt a sort of pleasure in influencing his impressionable friend.

"Liberty only leads to intrigues and idling; it does no good to an artist. A commonplace man may go in for that sort of thing—not an artist."

"I shall never care for anyone else," said Castagné, "I can't forget Hélène. I thought I saw her at Bâle in a train close to mine. I jumped out, thereby losing my train, and ran like a lost dog to the carriage where I thought she was."

"You will never *love* again," replied Albert, speaking softly under the influence of Castagné's husky voice, "but you might marry some young girl who attracts you—a really charming girl—Odette Quatrefage, for instance. She is very good-looking, and admires you. She would make a splendid wife. Have you noticed her pretty hands?"

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"I don't understand her," said Castagné.
"She can't appreciate a joke."

"She is highly imaginative—an idealist. Odette finds a serious or sublime meaning in the slightest thing you say."

"She is very tall," said Castagné hesitatingly, recalling Odette's face on a certain evening when she smiled at him, leaning on an oak chest in the hall. "I admire tall women."

"You have many recollections in common, even memories of childhood, and that in itself is a long step towards intimacy. Memories! You would never find those with any other girl."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I've already thought of marriage," said Castagné, raising himself on his pillow. "A writer ought to marry. I have known love, certainly, but one can only know life through marriage. If this experience is lacking one knows nothing, and only writes nonsense."

"You must hurry. They want to get her married," said Albert.

"You take advantage of my weakness."

"Let me arrange matters. I'll get you started on the right track."

Albert got up to go, but continued to speak excitedly, walking up and down the room.

"I give you three days to get well. I'll manage everything, and you'll thank me one day. You will never find her equal—she is so good, and such a charming person, too."

♦ ♦ ♦

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Two days after this Albert decided to call on the Quatrefages. He thought of Mme. Quatrefage's surprise when she learned that her dearest wish was to be miraculously realised. He wondered how Odette would take it.

"How disturbing to that placid soul!" he said to himself, while appearing to listen to M. Lardit, whom he followed into Vagnière's office. At the Quatrefages he mounted the stairs two steps at a time without waiting for the lift.

"My father has gone to Rouen," said Odette, coming out into the hall on hearing Albert's voice.

"And your mother?"

"She has gone to fetch Mercédès from her class. She will soon be back."

Albert entered the salon.

"I have something important to say to you," he began breathlessly.

He saw Odette's large eyes fixed anxiously upon him and went on:

"Do you ever wonder about a certain young man you have often met, a friend of your family whom you have known a long time? Have you ever thought you could care for him? Do I alarm you? One is sometimes mistaken about love—people imagine it begins romantically, but it doesn't always. It often comes when one is always thinking of a certain person, when one enjoys seeing a lot of him."

He looked down at Odette's hands and continued: "If your parents approve of him, and

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he is young, clever, and rich, you mustn't wait for a great passion. That will never come, and you might lose your only chance of happiness. I speak to you as an old friend," Albert continued gently, touching Odette's hand with the tips of his fingers. "Do you think me too blunt?"

"I don't know in the least what you are talking about," said Odette in a stifled voice.

Albert was silent for a few moments, then said reluctantly :

"I am speaking of Castagné!"

Odette was visibly reassured.

"Do you know his intentions, then?"

"You are thinking that he has authorised me to speak to you. Perhaps I have said the things that you have not had the courage to say to each other. I feared you would drift apart through misunderstanding. Now, let me tell you exactly what I think about it all. We often judge wrongly those whom we love, and afterwards reproach them for not conforming to our estimate of them, but it isn't their fault. You are a very reasonable person. Castagné is an artist."

He stopped suddenly, and went towards the door of the drawing-room.

"I think I hear your mother. Don't come—I want to speak to her alone."

♦ ♦ ♦

"Our engagement will be very short," said Odette, who was talking to Bertha in Mme.

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Dégouy's drawing-room. "We hope to be married in March. Haven't I shown you my engagement ring . . . ?"

She took the ring off her finger and shyly held it out for her friend to see.

"I mustn't wear it yet. We shall not be officially engaged till Wednesday. You and your mother must dine with us on that day. Oh, my dear," Odette continued, touching Bertha's arm, "when we met at Fortuny's I little thought that I should tell you of my engagement the next time I saw you. Suzanne was not surprised—she told me she expected it. We had cared for each other for a long time. I remember so well three years ago—one discovers these things afterwards—when Philip came to our house after playing tennis one foggy day, I had an intuition. . . ."

While listening to Odette, Bertha thought of Albert, whose kisses she could still feel. Did she recall the first day of their love? That love had grown along with her; it had no beginning. She had no memories, and hardly any existence apart from him. And these dinners, these calls, these presents, this concourse of commonplace people which she could not have endured—she understood that all this led up to marriage, and that she would never marry the man she cared for.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE morning, on stepping into his cold bath, M. Pacaris was attacked by a feeling of suffocation. He got out of the bath at once and rubbed himself hard to alleviate this agonising sensation. In the glass he saw that his face was very red, and his teeth chattered. He went back to bed and presently felt better. He was late getting to his office, and seemed more irritable than usual. Vagnière was careful not to ask after his health, but he was unable to avoid M. Pacaris' scolding.

M. Pacaris was secretly uneasy about himself, though he never complained ; saying to himself that will-power and hard work were the best remedies for an active man. He was really trying to make himself believe that he was perfectly well, and he consulted Dr. Natte, fully believing that so old a friend would find him in good health.

" I feel worse after speaking," he said in an altered voice. His heart beat rapidly, while he bared his brawny chest and felt Natte's cool ear against it. Then, as if to secure a favourable opinion from the doctor, he said meekly : " It is quite natural."

Albert waited on the pavement outside the house to question Natte more freely than was possible indoors.

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“What do you think about him?” he asked as the doctor was stepping into his car.

“His circulation isn’t very good,” said Natte, “and his heart is rather weak. He complains of dizziness, but that’s nothing serious. He needs a rest and must eat sparingly. No wine. I have advised him to go to Cannes for a month.”

“We shall never persuade him to leave Paris just now.”

“I suggested Cannes as he won’t be so bored in such a beautiful place, but Fontainebleau would do just as well. He must forget business for a time.”

M. Pacaris decided to leave Paris immediately. He was in a hurry to go to Cannes, and appeared to have lost interest in his work. Thinking this might be a mere whim, Albert tried to persuade him to go somewhere nearer Paris; but M. Pacaris was determined upon Cannes as though the place indicated by the doctor possessed magical qualities.

Albert worked very hard after M. Pacaris’ departure, but he went often to Cannes. His behaviour perplexed Bertha, and she wondered how he could remain so long without seeing her. She would have liked to appear indifferent, and reproached herself for writing to him too often, but everything she did to distract her mind from him only intensified her love. She planned her dress for Odette’s wedding, undecided as to colour and material, and made excuses for constantly going out, running hither

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and thither, indefatigable and then tired out, spending her energy recklessly. At night her head ached and she could not sleep.

One afternoon, as she lay with closed eyes on the drawing-room sofa, rest intensifying instead of relieving her suffering, she thought suddenly : “ Suppose I were to be ill and Albert’s letters were to be found. . . .” Though the movement hurt her terribly, she raised her head and dragged herself to her room. From a drawer she took two packets of letters, threw them into the fire and watched their slow burning. She bent over to stir them, but the pain at the back of her neck caused her to straighten up quickly.



Bertha opened her eyes and saw a bright fire close to her. Two women in white whispered together in a corner of the room. It was certainly her own room, but it looked emptier, and the furniture arranged differently. She lay motionless, her heart beating wildly, and tried to understand what had happened. Her tired mind was finally forced to accept reality ; she was not dreaming but was actually a prisoner before this fire. There were drops of perspiration on her face, and she said to herself, “ I am in hell—here—in this room where I lived upon earth. This is where I threw his letters away, and that fire will never be quenched ; it will always burn me because I have sinned. I might get away,

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but those women over there are keeping watch over me."

She longed to say how much she suffered, but dared not speak, and the women looked at her suspiciously.

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She heard Mme. Dégouy's voice and thought her nightmare was over, but she failed to recognise her mother in this person who spoke so gaily. "Mother was so good and sensible; she will know how I'm suffering. But it can't be mother; this is the final blow; I shall see her face and speak to her, but she will answer me like a stranger."

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Sometimes, on awaking, she delayed opening her eyes, thinking that perhaps she might find the bed facing the window as it used to be. But a hand seized her wrist: "Well, now . . ." said a voice, which fell harshly upon her ears; and she understood that the torture was still to go on—the fire and the two dreadful women.

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"We want you to sit up to-day," and one of the women brought a basin full of tepid water, and placed a cushion at Bertha's back. Whilst they plaited her hair, Bertha, worn out even by this simple toilette, looked resignedly at her father's old shawl placed on a *chaise longue* in the middle of the room. The bedclothes which

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for so long had weighed upon her were thrown back, and she felt the fresh air on her bare feet, strangely small and white. She put her arm round the woman's neck, and, with head hanging down, let herself be carried to a sofa.

Mme. Dégouy came into the room exclaiming joyfully :

“ Well, darling ! Aren't you glad to get up ? ” She sat down close to her daughter, holding out a scent-bottle. “ It is eau de cologne,” she said briskly. “ You like it, don't you ? Keep yourself covered with that nice soft shawl.”

Bertha looked fixedly at the door, saying to herself : “ Presently I shall run out and see if we are still at home—perhaps I can find Hortense, she'll know.”

With great precaution, narrowly watching the woman who was changing the sheets, the girl slid one foot down by the side of her chair, stood up and took one trembling step towards the door, but suddenly she caught sight of her face in the glass ; it was as pale as that of a dead person. She fell back into her chair, half-fainting, and the nurse who carried her back to bed said : “ You have frightened your mother, you naughty girl ! We can't leave you for an instant ! ”

Bertha wondered why her mother was frightened. Then she thought of the mirror. She had looked like Robert Passera's daughter. “ I understand ; she was consumptive—so am I—I shall die.”

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Grave and silent, she submissively allowed herself to be nursed back to life, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

“It is a pity not to know what life had in store for me ; but I am not afraid of dying. Why does mother only think of amusing me ? I so much want her to stay by my side, and be her usual self, and speak in her serious voice. They don’t seem to understand—we are already apart—I see her eyes smiling, and yet her care for me is no use.”

Then she thought of Albert, but banished his image from her mind as though it tarnished the purity of her soul, so soon to leave this world.



Mme. Dégouy came to Bertha’s bedside.

“Odette is here ; she would like to see you.”

The door opened gently, and there was Odette’s tall figure dressed in furs that Bertha did not remember having seen before, and a hat with a white aigrette.

“Well ! my dear,” said Odette softly, leaning over the bed. “Are you better ? ”

The sick girl gazed at her friend with a child-like expression of delight, not quite understanding how she came to be there.

“It is so long since I saw you,” said Odette, holding her handkerchief to her eyes, and smiling through her tears.

“I’ve had typhoid fever.”

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"But you are well now," said Odette, glancing at the nurse.

Bertha was touched by Odette's compassionate air, which was something new and sweet in her; but dared not speak and gazed at the lovely hat with the aigrette.

"You do your hair differently," she remarked with a feeble smile.

"Oh! you noticed it?" said Odette, putting up her hand. "Yes, Philip prefers this style. You know we are married now. . . . Good-bye, dear—I mustn't stay too long to-day—I have brought you some flowers—some pinks."

"Good-bye," said Bertha.

She repeated "Odette—Philip," without fully understanding Odette's presence in her room. Then she smelt the flowers mechanically; their strong scent reminded her of hot days at Noizic, and the memory she had tried so hard to obliterate returned in all its intensity.

Odette rejoined Mme. Dégouy in the hall.

"She is altered, isn't she?" said Mme. Dégouy, going into the drawing-room.

"Yes," Odette admitted, "One can see she has been very ill. Has she suffered much?"

"At first a great deal—in her head—she was delirious for a long time; we had difficulty in keeping her quiet."

"You have been dreadfully upset," said Odette, remarking her aunt's tired face.

"Oh! my dear!" cried Mme. Dégouy with quivering lips, and eyes full of tears. "You

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can't imagine what I have gone through ! One night I was called up—she was quite cold—we could not warm her—I called ' Bertha ! Bertha ! ' and she could not hear me. Your mother came the following day ; she ought to have written to tell you. We thought she was dying."

" Yes," said Odette, softly, looking at Mme. Dégouy with consternation, " we were at Pisa."

" Later on it was her sadness more than anything else which puzzled the doctor, and we tried to cheer her up. They would not let me be with her long—she was so easily excited. I could only see her for a moment at a time. She was always so pale, so sad, so solemn."

" She knows now that she has had typhoid ; she told me so."

" She must have guessed it, but it does not matter, now that she is saved."

" Shall you stay in Paris for her convalescence ? "

" We're going to Noizic as soon as she is fit to travel ; perfect quiet and fresh air are needed. She will get up in a few days, and we can probably go before the end of March. And how is Philip ? Have you just arrived in Paris ? "

" We are just going to settle down," Odette replied, rising. " The flat is not ready yet, so we are at an hotel. I will come again soon," she added, looking back and smiling affectionately.

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At Noizic, Bertha regained her strength. On sunny days she sat wrapped in a shawl on the terrace, and walked a little with the support of Emma and her mother. She seemed to be entering upon a new phase of her life, and she felt for the first time the healing power of light. Formerly, when she returned to Noizic, she tried to recall the memories of her childhood ; now, her mind was engrossed in discovering a new and intoxicating beauty in everything around her ; she forgot Albert and all those terrible months of fever and headaches.

CHAPTER IX

IN the garden the trees were now bare. From her bedroom window Bertha could see the branches in the neighbouring orchards, the windmill at Graves, and poplars in the distance. When it rained the ladies stayed indoors by the fire, but when patches of blue sky appeared they went out. Bertha was surprised that she should experience such pleasure in being out-of-doors. She helped Emma in the house and garden ; superintended the children's lessons, and practised the piano. These peaceful occupations engaged, without completely absorbing her active mind, now grown more thoughtful and mature. Recalling her childish impressions in these surroundings, Bertha thought of the smell of flowers, of those delicious early morning and late evening hours, which she could not enjoy now. She walked along the roads wrapped in her cloak, and wearing her red toque, and she found she possessed a greater capacity for enjoyment, which enabled her to appreciate the charm of a March landscape. On the Saint Hilaire road a flock of sparrows fluttered away from a large bramble bush at her approach, reassembling further on in a nut tree, only to fly away again to the next. She stood presently on the edge of a ditch and looked down at the

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stagnant water ; raising her eyes she saw a wide expanse of low-lying flooded fields, a farm cart, and the delicate outlines of trees in a copse. She felt with gratitude that this grey silent landscape, impoverished it is true, but open, peaceful and soothing, brought detachment from the old disquieting influences.

Sometimes, towards evening, she went as far as the Sendre Marshes, green with winter rains. When the tide came up the river, ships could enter with furled sails between the grassy banks, and the rising water spread out over the low land, filling the wells and salt-pits with the scent of the sea. The sky was red at sunset, and the surface of a pond among the dark hills shone out brightly for a moment. On the way home she caught sight of the postman's figure silhouetted against the evening sky and hastened towards him, suddenly anxious to receive a letter.

"Have you anything for us?" she asked, and he held out a large envelope; recognising Albert's hand-writing, she opened it under a street lamp. It contained an announcement of the death of M. Pacaris. "M. Pacaris is dead," Bertha repeated to herself, walking very quickly as if in haste to announce such incredible news; but once indoors she went directly to her room.

She re-read :

"M. Albert Pacaris, M. Arthur Pacaris, M. et Madame Bose . . ."

Her eyes returned to Albert's name, and his

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writing on the envelope. She decided to send him a friendly little letter of condolence, and sat down at her writing-table. It was here, before this tier of little drawers that, terrified of approaching footsteps, she had written him her first timid letter—how well she remembered it, and Albert as he looked in those days. But she felt she was now writing to a different man; he had gone out of her life, and doubtless he had altered during the past year. Probably he was unhappy and pre-occupied with his father's death, and had ceased to think of her; she pictured him dressed in mourning, wearing an unfamiliar expression—grave and cold, and could think of nothing to write him.

CHAPTER X

A FEW days after her arrival in Paris Bertha was invited to lunch with the Castagnés.

"You look very well, my dear," said Odette, kissing her. "You frightened us all dreadfully. What a terrible illness!"

"I feel very well now," said Bertha. "Let me admire everything. How nice it all is!"

"I love the view over the Seine," said Odette, approaching the window. "I can't show you Philip's study."

She sat down and Bertha observed that her eyes seemed to have grown larger, and her face longer.

"The cook is late again," said Odette, suddenly growing pale without ceasing to smile, as she looked languidly at the clock.

"It is Philip's fault; he always goes out just at lunch time."

"How tiresome for you," rejoined Bertha, looking at her affectionately, just as Philip entered the room.

"I am not late to-day," he said, turning to Odette. "Don't you admire my promptness? You look charming, little cousin!"

During luncheon, as she sipped her wine, Bertha observed the handsome table appointments. Philip was very attentive to his wife,

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and an atmosphere of well-being and elegance pervaded everything. Odette's discomfiture disappeared in face of Philip's good humour, and both pressed much kindly hospitality on Bertha. After lunch they went into the drawing-room.

"Bertha will excuse you," said Odette as her husband put his coffee-cup on the mantelpiece, and leading her friend to a sofa for a chat, she continued :

"It is most necessary for him to go out a little before returning to work. Have you read the new novel by Bouillierie ? "

"I am a country cousin—you mustn't talk to me about books."

"How is Emma ? " asked Odette. "She has another little girl, hasn't she ? about a year old, I suppose. I believe it is ten years since I saw Emma."

"She may come to Paris next autumn."

"Oh ! I am glad ! " said Odette, rising to ring the bell. "How long did you stay at Noizic ? and did you enjoy being there ? "

"Yes—very much."

She drew nearer to Odette and said gaily :

"Do you know, I have discovered the joy of living in the country. I have learnt to be independent of other people, and to know myself better."

In spite of her polite and affectionate manner, Odette seemed absorbed in her own thoughts, and Bertha realised that their lives now were different.

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She wished to go, but prolonged her visit.

"I hear that M. Pacaris is dead," she said suddenly as she rose.

"He had heart-trouble, but he got better—and then a sudden attack carried him off."

Bertha put on her hat before the mirror in the hall; Odette held her visitor's muff in her hand, stroking the fur, and said:

"We hardly ever see Albert; he is very busy nowadays."

Bertha walked along the banks of the Seine as far as the suburban quays before going home. She felt the need to walk, and wanted to realise her independence fully.

"Odette will have a baby," she thought; "it will be lovely; fair and rosy; Philip is a perfect husband. They will be having tea soon, a very good tea, and then they will go out together."

Conventional happiness like this did not appeal to her. Other people's way of love never fitted her ideal, but then the sort of thing she wanted did not exist anywhere.



Albert always rose early. When, long before Vagnière's arrival, he sat down at his neatly-arranged table, he said to himself: "How energetic one feels in the morning"; when he looked at his list of engagements at this early hour, in the first freshness of the dawn his active mind took pleasure in reviewing the coming day's work.

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Clients who came to see him were detained for some time in his chambers, while he talked at great length, reconsidering some knotty point already argued, as though to atone for his youthful look and inexperience by his pleasant manner and attention to detail. Afterwards, aware that he was late for an appointment at the law courts, he blamed himself for his talkativeness and inability to shorten an interview.

Albert had retained Vagnière. At one time he had not understood how his father could put up with so obnoxious a clerk. But now he hesitated to alter even what he had formerly disliked ; and when deciding important matters sought, unconsciously, for what would have been the elder Pacaris' point of view. Besides, he could not dispense with Vagnière, who had been for so long thoroughly conversant with M. Pacaris' affairs. So, although he disliked the obsequious clerk with his discreet superiority, Albert felt that to do without him would be the height of imprudence.

He went a great deal into society that winter. When he dined at home the meal was eaten in nervous haste, scarcely allowing time for Hugot to wait upon him. Afterwards, in the drawing-room, he collapsed into an easy chair and closed his eyes as though exhausted. He longed to go to bed and rest, but there was usually some society function or other where he was expected. It held no charm for him, but he rose reluctantly and by the time he had shaved he felt rested.

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Regretting this futile waste of energy, he sometimes stayed at home after dressing, and shut himself up in his study with a favourite author. One evening, taking up by chance a familiar novel, he said to himself :

“ I never understood why I liked this book ; I admired it for qualities it does not possess.” He felt like re-reading all he had ever read, even philosophy, which he had formerly regarded as useless ; he considered learning Italian.

“ I could do that in three months ; it is only at my age that one knows how to work,” he reflected. This craving for literature invaded his business hours, and it was then that he planned his evening reading, but when evening came silence and loneliness drove him out.

Albert awoke one morning from a dream of Bertha in which she appeared in all her sweetness and loveliness, silently listening to him with downcast eyes, just as memory often brought her to him in waking moments. On his way to the Castagnés to inquire after Odette, he remembered a certain conversation with Philip, and said to himself :

“ I am afraid of marriage with a stranger ; but I know Bertha so well ; we have been dear friends for years. Unconsciously, I have educated her for myself. She knows me thoroughly, and loves me. She won't worry or bore me, because she loves me as I am.”

Then he put this idea out of his mind. It was useless to think seriously of such things.

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"All has gone well," said Castagné, pouring into his glass the remains of a bottle of beer left by the doctor. "She only suffered for an hour, she didn't really have a very bad time."

"Shall you call him Michael?" Albert said.

"Yes, Michael. He is a fine boy; I can't show him to you yet; he is in our room. Odette is wonderful; she is talking to Emma now."

The door opened; Emma made a sign to Castagné and bowed coldly to Albert.



Wandering that day towards the Invalides, Albert found himself in the rue de Grenelle, which led towards the quarter where Bertha lived. She was so much in his thoughts that she must surely appear suddenly among the passers-by, and all at once he caught sight of her. Seized by shyness, pretending not to have seen her, he crossed the street abruptly, with as indifferent an air as he could assume. But Bertha recognised him and bowed.

"I beg your pardon, I didn't recognise you," said the bashful lover. "I met your sister at the Castagnés'. You know they have a little son?"

"Yes—Emma came to see us," Bertha replied hastily in tremulous tones, wishing to refer to M. Pacaris' death, but continuing to speak of Emma.

Hat in hand and speaking rapidly during this somewhat confused dialogue, Albert noticed for the first time the sound of Bertha's voice

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with certain details of her face and figure ; she seemed taller. He spoke to her in a hesitating voice, low and full of real feeling.

“ You have been ill ! ” Then he asked :

“ Shall we go into this garden ? ”

All at once Bertha's illness and all that had since happened vanished like a dream, and nothing but the old emotion that had suddenly come to life.

“ I wanted to write to you,” said Albert, “ but did not dare. You had gone away.”

He was merely trying to find out if she had thought of him, but his words seemed in spite of him to carry a serious import.

“ I heard . . . ” Bertha began.

“ Yes—he died suddenly,” said Albert, reading her thoughts. “ I am so sorry he never knew you.”

He continued with downcast eyes :

“ It is strange, but I was certain I should come across you in this street. Odette said you were changed by your illness. I don't know what she meant,” and looking at her with a smile he added :

“ I don't find you changed, and I think I know you better than anyone.”

They sat down on a seat and were silent for a few moments, while Albert prodded the sand with the end of his walking-stick.

“ Bertha,” he said suddenly, “ are we going to live apart now ? ”

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They left the garden an engaged pair, and to Bertha this seemed perfectly natural, pre-ordained from the first hour of their first meeting. Even the usual formalities, introductions, and new family relations which she once thought unendurable now seemed quite a matter of course. She told her mother nothing ; but confided in Emma, who listened without astonishment, and said in some excitement, with sparkling black eyes :

“ I knew that you knew each other. I met him at Fondebaud, and heard a good deal about him. Do think, think it over carefully. . . . I am afraid that what I say will hurt you, but I got the idea. . . . I must tell you that he gives me the impression of being a fast man. Your whole existence is at stake ! Of course you must do as you like, but one can suffer so much through a man—it’s that that worries me.”

She endeavoured to moderate her words, but, afterwards, in writing to her husband to announce the engagement, she felt more strongly than ever that the marriage would be an unfortunate one for Bertha. She did not think out her reasons, and secretly disliked this man, whose clandestine meetings with Bertha she had suspected.

Going into her mother’s room, Bertha interrupted a conversation between Emma and Mme. Dégouy.

“ In spite of your opinion, my dear,” said Mme. Dégouy, continuing the discussion in

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Bertha's presence, " as they love each other, it is for them to decide—we can't do it. May God bless them ! ”

Bertha threw her arms round her mother in gratitude for these kind words which were the outcome of her simple faith, for the love which never suspected wrong-doing, and which now seemed to cleanse her from evil and assure her the blessing of God.

CHAPTER XI

ALBERT wanted his marriage to bring discipline into his life, and he planned his days so that each hour should find him occupied, especially guarding himself against allowing caprice or nervous excitability to break his self-appointed rule. Having heard it said that marriage produced idleness, he determined to fortify himself against this danger ; he attended the law courts only when absolutely necessary, wrote his letters on Sunday morning, left receptions at the appointed hour, and ceased work regularly at half-past six.

At luncheon, absent-minded and still absorbed in business, he ate hurriedly, and Bertha, understanding his mood, smiled at his transparent efforts to appear attentive, and did not seek to distract him from professional cares.

“ Good-bye, darling, don’t tire yourself too much,” she said when he kissed her, looking at his watch.

She knew that her time would come—those evening hours, formerly so blank, now the sweetest of all. She was happy with a home of her own, and often she stayed indoors all day. Occasionally, on hearing her husband’s familiar footstep in the hall during the afternoon, she would refrain from calling him, glad to make this tiny sacrifice for the sake of his work.

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She always dressed early for dinner. Sometimes she wore a girlish summer frock, on other occasions an austere black one, or an elaborate low-necked affair. When Albert came into the drawing-room, pale and serious, she would instinctively check herself and wait patiently while he sat with closed eyes in an easy chair. She knew he would soon recover from his fatigue.

"Don't speak—rest a little longer," she would say, sitting on the edge of his chair, lightly pressing his temples and running her fingers through his hair—a caress which seemed to smooth out the lines on his forehead, and to relax the corners of his tightly compressed lips. Restored by her touch from exhaustion to a smiling sense of well-being, he would open his eyes and ask :

"What have you been doing to-day ? "

Bertha always had a bright entertaining record of the day's doings, to which he listened with an expression at once amused and blissful. He found in her quaint recital, with its easy, picturesque language, a refreshment for his jaded mind, equal to the touch of her fingers on his forehead. He took Bertha on his knee and listened endlessly to her chatter, silencing her every now and then with a long kiss.

"You have not told me what you have done to-day," said Albert one evening, pressing the cold ivory paper-knife against his forehead.

"I went to Alice Bonifas's after lunch, but I didn't stay long, for Odette expected me at three.

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I hadn't seen Alice for two months, and I don't want to give her up now that I am married. I was her only friend in Paris in the old days."

"And M. Ramage?" Albert inquired with a slight smile.

"He was there. I have discovered the secret of his gravity. He never laughs because he has no teeth; but he did laugh once to-day, and put his handkerchief to his mouth—like this—"

Sitting on Albert's knee, she fumbled in one of his pockets.

"There you are again—no handkerchief. That reminds me. . . . Once upon a time," she continued, touching his waistcoat, "all these little pockets roused my curiosity. One day I found a tram ticket, do you remember?"

"And what made M. Ramage laugh?"

"You don't like reminiscences."

"Yes, I do, but I know all about them. Now I don't know why M. Ramage laughed."

Sitting down in an armchair, Bertha wore a thoughtful expression as she remarked:

"Odette came to see me to-day; she is just as pretty as ever; she stayed till six o'clock. Her marriage has changed her towards me, and in her own house I would scarcely know her. She is entirely taken up with her baby—I feel in the way there. But to-day we talked freely—we chattered no end—you know, the sort of prattle you think so ridiculous. But that is just how women talk to each other, plenty of words and plenty of time, then we feel we have said

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everything we want to say—emptied our heads, so to speak.”

“ And what did you talk about ? ”

“ She talked about Philip. Did you know they went to Brittany for their wedding-tour ? She says Brittany is marvellous in the spring.”

She slipped on to the floor, at Albert's feet, her head resting against his knees :

“ Wouldn't you like to travel ? I am not keen on travelling, as you know, and I don't particularly want to go to Brittany—but just a few days, I don't mind where—I should see more of you—have whole days of you, and you wouldn't be busy ! ”

“ I can't possibly leave Paris at present,” Albert said, getting up with an anxious air. “ I have so much work on hand just now ; you know I have. I shall be in court to-morrow—not an important case, it's true, but I haven't a moment to think it over, and to-morrow morning I have six appointments—I really must work this evening,” and sitting down he continued, more calmly : “ I am not at all sorry we have escaped the usual honeymoon. I don't want our marriage to be like everyone else's.”

Bertha knew that his fastidiousness had repressed any exhibition of feeling which would bring them down to the level of the ordinary honeymoon couple. He had determined from the first that their marriage should be placed on the calm and durable basis of an old-established intimacy ; she appreciated the refinement

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that put their union on so high a plane, and tried to check what she knew to be foolish in herself.

Suddenly Albert dropped into one of those deep silences Bertha had already noticed on more than one occasion. She understood and could break a silence due to over-fatigue, but this mysterious dumbness, when her husband retired into himself, deeply brooding with fixed eyes, was disquieting because she knew instinctively that she dared not interrupt it. He rose at length, and clasping her arm, cried gaily :

“ I still don't know why M. Ramage laughed.”



“ *La Proie* is still on. Would it amuse you to see it ? ”

“ If you like,” replied Bertha.

“ I don't think it's worth the trouble,” said Albert, continuing to scan the list of plays, and then putting down the newspaper. “ But I don't want to condemn you to too dull a life—we might go to the Darcourts on Friday.”

“ If you are going on my account I prefer *La Proie*.”

“ My time was well spent at the Darcourts' last week. By a mere chance I met Rochard. I am certain he was going to ask me to send back his briefs ; he has not been to me since my father's death. Well, a few moments' conversation in a corner of the drawing-room, some

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pleasant words, fixed him ; a personal interview is everything. Yes—" Albert continued, pacing the room, " it shall be the play ; is it comic or tragic ? "

He sat down, his hands in his pockets, resting his head on the back of the chair, while Bertha, bending over some embroidery, now and then raised her eyes to him.

" I thought you didn't know how to embroider ? "

" Yes," she smiled, " see how clever I am ! I began this piece of work so that you shouldn't bother about me. When I am sewing you feel freer to speak just when you want to and I can listen and work at the same time. As to the theatre, I assure you I don't mind a bit, you are quite enough for me."

With these words she laid down her work, and going up to her husband took his hands in her own.

" Tell me that I don't bother you, even at this time when you used to be alone. What used you to do after dinner ? I don't want you to be always feeling that I am here. I merely wish you to find the house less lonely."

She put her fingers on Albert's eyes. " Now—you are quite alone."

Smiling, he removed Bertha's hand, and held it in his own, repeating to himself the phrase : " You are quite enough for me," and looking at her beautiful eyes shining in the lamp-light ; then once more settling himself in the armchair,

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he opened the newspaper and read an advertisement. Then he began to wonder : " Now, why did I take up this newspaper ? I was trying instinctively to avoid the pleasure I felt. It almost seems that I give way naturally to melancholy and fight shy of happiness—refuse it even."

" What are you thinking about ? " Bertha asked gently.

He looked at her with a thoughtful smile and replied :

" I was thinking how happy we were."

A moment's silence and she rejoined :

" You look very grave when you think of happiness."

Without replying he kept looking at her with a reflective and slightly alarmed expression, fearing she read his secret thoughts.

" Why do you look at me like that without speaking ? " She grasped Albert's hands with tender anxiety : " Listen, darling—you frighten me sometimes. When you say nothing I feel as if I were losing you. I wonder why ? Do explain this : you have explained so much to me. Formerly I always understood you, but now you never speak of yourself—you hide your thoughts. It is always I who speak of ourselves. There ! at this very moment I feel you drifting away from me. You don't reply. Do you want to make me unhappy ? Why do you look at me so coldly ? "

Albert reflected : " My thoughts come from subconscious depths ; thank goodness she hasn't

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guessed them. If she had, we would be far apart," and he looked down sorrowfully at his paper.

"As you please," said Bertha, going into the dining-room, ostensibly to give some orders to Hugot, but really to rid herself of a painful impression. Albert had left the drawing-room when she returned to her work.

"What has happened between us?" she thought. "Nothing really—only one of these mysterious silences that cast a shadow over our happiness. Perhaps I am not tactful—he seemed annoyed. Why? Catherine said: 'Life is not easy during the early days of married life.' That's it, life is not always easy," and Bertha found comfort in repeating another woman's dictum.

"We are all alike," she thought.

Albert thought her different from other women, educated for marriage, accustomed to his ways, and matured by the experience of love. She appeared to conform to his ideas of her, but only by putting restraint upon herself; she wished he would listen to her more, ask her questions; help her to understand new sensations. "He thinks me too childish. Isn't it hard that I must hide my inmost thoughts from my husband? He doesn't seem to have the least idea of what I think and feel; yet how impossible it used to be not to tell him everything!"

"What have you put on the bedroom mantel-piece?" Albert asked, coming suddenly into the drawing-room.

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“ Oh ! nothing, just some little ornaments I used to have in my bedroom at home ; you saw them this morning. Don’t you remember ? You even handled the little horses.”

“ I don’t remember, but I’m sure that if I had seen those horses I should know it ; they are hideous. What I like about that mantel-piece is just the bare marble, with the handsome clock—a little cold and severe. A marvellous clock that My mother bought it at Jouot’s.”

Albert never took an interest in the domestic arrangements of the house. And Bertha saw that she had not only offended his personal taste but principles of æsthetics derived from his mother or M. Filipon. Recognising an irritating outside influence, and wishing to oppose it, also to assert her rights, she exclaimed resolutely :

“ You are mistaken ; they are pretty, and I think they brighten up the room.”

“ No,” cried Albert, “ no ; an ugly thing is an ugly thing ! It doesn’t—it can’t brighten up any room.”

Quickly and authoritatively came the rejoinder :

“ These things are not ugly ; I don’t say they have any value, but they are not ugly ; the mantel-piece is improved by them ; it is less bare.”

“ Not ugly ? ” said Albert, running into the bedroom and taking from the chimney-piece the china dog, the tiny Buddha, the little horses with crooked legs, and the glass vase. He brought them into the drawing-room.

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“Not ugly?” he cried feverishly, putting them under the lamp in a row. “You don’t think this dog—if it is a dog—ugly?”

“I don’t particularly admire that dog.”

“Yes,” Albert went on fretfully, “you do not admire this dog, but you would put the whole lot of things there. You have that holy horror of space which has begotten imitation Tanagras, paper flower-pot cases, glass vases, and a whole world of bronzes! Think of those impossible French interiors—the wallpapers of middle-class drawing-rooms!”

Crushed by this imperious critical voice, Bertha took refuge in her bedroom.

“Why all this fuss—these unkind looks, almost amounting to an open declaration of hate? Nothing in this house belongs to me; this corner reminds me of my room at home. Why can’t I have my poor little things about? Good heavens! the little horses are not silver—they have crooked legs. The little Buddha was the first present I ever had given to me. I remember—it was after I had scarlatina . . .” and her eyes filled with tears, as if she were a little girl, weak and forsaken—she who was so proud, and had never cried in former times, was easily moved to tears in these days.

Hearing Albert moving about, she went into the dressing-room and opened the medicine cupboard to hide her face.

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Leaning out of bed Albert looked at his watch.

"I am going to put out the light," he said.

The clock in the drawing-room chimed softly, and, drawing up the bed-clothes, he slid his arm under Bertha's shoulder, saying :

"I think I hear them walking about overhead. Have they come back?"

"I saw them this morning."

"Look here!" said Albert gently, closing his eyes and stroking his wife's arm, his head resting against her soft body under its fine cambric. "Of course you can arrange your chimney-piece just as you like—I teased you abominably. I was irritated, you know, because you didn't understand. . . ." Thus he swept away Bertha's trouble; all uneasiness vanished in the true affection which united them. They were silent—a motor-horn sounded in the distance, and a bicycle bell tinkled sharply in the silent street.

"Are you asleep?" Albert asked. "I have invited Maurisset to dinner on Thursday. We might ask the Juliens too."

"Maurisset? Really?"

"Oh, yes. He is quite easy to entertain; he often dined with me in the old days."

Hearing this beloved voice close to her ear, Bertha was conscious of Albert by her side, but she had a weird sensation that his body was that of a stranger, having no connection with the face she pictured in the darkness.



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"Has it begun?" asked Albert, hastily taking off his overcoat. On entering the theatre with its tarnished gilding, they saw by the crowd—pale in semi-darkness—that there was a full house.

"Come on," said Albert in a whisper, seeing Bertha stand still with eyes fixed on the brilliant stage. Still gazing at it, Bertha sat down beside Albert, fascinated by the actors whose paint and dresses were vividly apparent in the brilliant lighting; the crowd listened with repressed agitation, coughing and rustling, as though in an uneasy slumber.

"They speak too quickly," said Bertha, glancing at Albert.

"You're not sorry we came?"

"No—listen to the play."

Ceasing to pay attention to details of scenery, sound of voices, or to the strange animation of these real, yet fictitious beings, Bertha became more and more absorbed until, overwhelmed by their sufferings—understanding them only too well, she shared completely in the passion of the actors. Her emotion was so great that in spite of the crowd of unknown persons in the dimly lighted theatre, tears filled her eyes; she was afraid of her sensitiveness to love's torments, and drawing closer to Albert, slid her arm on to his knee and put her hand into his; he held it abstractedly, also absorbed in listening to the play. Conscious of his abstraction, she drew it away; observing at the same moment a man

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leaning over a young girl at the back of a box. This sight brought vividly to her recollection a certain afternoon when she was only eighteen. Albert had brought her to this same theatre, and they too had remained hidden by curtains at the back of a box. His eyes had never left her face during the whole performance.

“Do you remember?” she whispered.

“Don’t talk! I can’t hear!”

His irritation, at a moment when her feelings were deeply stirred, affected her with a sort of terror and desire to escape; so she rose and slid past a lady’s knees.

“This is insufferable,” exclaimed an old man standing up to let her pass, and following her with angry eyes. To an attendant she said quietly:

“The theatre is too hot for me.”

Then Albert appeared, and his look of annoyance caused her to run quickly up the stairs and along the corridor to the glass entrance doors.

“What on earth is the matter?” cried her husband as he came up to her. “Are you mad?”

Having herself no idea why she had gone out, and hearing only this harsh voice, Bertha’s sole reply was to try and open the door.

“Let that door alone!” he commanded, seizing her hands, just as a burst of applause reached their ears. “What is the matter?” he asked in a lower tone.

People were calmly pacing the corridor, and

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Bertha, as if awaking from a nightmare, made an effort at self-control.

"Answer me," said Albert. "We are making fools of ourselves."

"It's nothing—I suddenly felt—I'll explain to you later."

Outside the theatre Albert took his wife's arm.

"Let us walk home—the air is delightfully fresh—theatres are so stuffy," he remarked, adding, more kindly: "Do explain why you came out. You can quite well tell me now."

"I don't know," she replied in a troubled voice. "I was tired. Don't think about it any more."

"You mustn't give way to queer fancies," said Albert slowly, in a low voice. "Nervous complaints often have their origin in bad temper. You must control yourself."

Stopping to look at a passing crowd of men, he went on earnestly:

"One can always control oneself. One can lay in a store of moral force like oxygen. At one time I used to be frightened of crossing the streets; then I forced myself to go slowly, and now I cross quite calmly from one pavement to another. After that little victory over my nerves I could prevent myself from replying hastily to an irritating letter, which of course is always a great mistake. I have noticed you are often nervous. Yes—at the Begouins'—I didn't make any remark about it—that little tiff last night—those are bad signs—you used to be so

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even-tempered. I remember how much I appreciated your sweetness and calm."

They walked slowly along, passing dark, closed shops. Crowds of theatre-goers filled the boulevard, lighted by huge electric globes, and everywhere motor cars vibrated loudly and darted away.

Aware of her over-sensitiveness, which now appeared the more detestable because Albert perceived it, Bertha listened meekly to his good advice without attempting to excuse herself. She feared that, if this defect increased until she became really weak-minded and irritable, perhaps he would cease to love her. Albert was pleased that his words had impressed his wife, and forgot his annoyance. He was far from wishing her to remain as melancholy as she appeared at this moment, especially as he himself felt cheerful; so he stopped before the lace-curtained windows of a restaurant. Palms threw their shadows on the silk blinds, and he led the way in between the tables, as if knowing exactly the place he wanted. Bertha sat down, then got up again to arrange her hair before a mirror; three people were sitting at the next table.

"The orchestra is not bad," she remarked as she listened to the conversation at the next table. Then she went on in a low voice: "I think he's a barrister. Do you know him?"

"No, I don't know him," Albert replied, also listening in spite of himself.

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To distract her mind from conversation she could not help overhearing, Bertha looked round this haunt of pleasure-seekers, where shaded lights shone on white necks gleaming with jewels. She recalled what she had been taught as a young girl on the subject of women's behaviour, and the sacred dignity of woman, but she concluded that the most beautiful and best dressed women attracted men most. A waiter brought them a clean tablecloth and put a small basket of strawberries in front of Bertha.

"Let's have some champagne," said Albert. "Some sweet champagne and a small cutlet. They have excellent cutlets here."

"Waiter!" he called, raising one finger. He leaned back with an air of enjoyment, listening to the strains of a waltz, drank a mouthful of champagne and, finding his mind clear and active in this pleasant atmosphere, thought, as he looked expansively about him, of the Chavannes case, and of his success that morning in the courts.

"D'you see that little man writing a letter near the door?—it is Arton. You don't seem to be enjoying yourself. Taste these strawberries. They are beautiful and insipid, like the women here."

"I am enjoying myself very much," Bertha rejoined, smiling.

Carrying his violin under his arm, a musician in a red waistcoat stopped in front of their table and bowed to them.

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“What about a peach? Isn't there anything else you would like? You're thinking of something you won't tell me—I am sure of it.”

“No. I am quite happy.”

“Tell me.”

“It is nothing—you would laugh at me.”

“Tell me in a whisper,” said he, leaning towards her tenderly.

“It is nothing—only a recollection.”

Bertha would like to have made her explanation lightly, but her voice suddenly became serious as she said:

“I was thinking about that woman you used to know. That one you told me about, at Castagné's.”

“What an idea!” exclaimed Albert.

“She was a friend of your family I think. You met her at Saint Malo.”

“What an absurd idea!” cried her husband, passing his hand over his eyes. “Really! this is hardly the time to rake up an old story of fifteen years ago—a story which has no foundation! And is that why you have looked unhappy for the last hour?”

“I'm not unhappy. But why do you say it had no foundation?”

“I told you five or six years ago, and it wasn't worth mentioning then. I remember it produced so little impression upon you that I embellished it in order not to appear a simpleton—and now it suddenly comes into your mind this evening. Why this evening of all times?”

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“ I know quite well that it’s not of any importance, but a whole winter counts for something.”

“ Did I say a whole winter ? As a matter of fact it did not last a week. But why recall an unreal incident out of the past ? This evening it seems never to have happened.”

“ You don’t understand,” Bertha answered steadily. “ I don’t attach any importance to it. I only want to know why you refuse to speak of it ? ”

Observing a frown on his wife’s forehead, Albert remained obstinately silent.

“ There is nothing to tell, because nothing happened.”

“ You are extraordinary,” cried Bertha, trying to keep down her irritation. “ Why do you now try to hide a story which you have told me before ? Why say that you exaggerated it, and that it is all an invention ? ”

“ Always ! ” said he, clenching his fist, “ always, whenever we go out together some preposterous notion comes into your head. Waiter ! ” he cried.

“ Don’t get excited. You know quite well it is you who cause trouble between us.”

“ I am quite calm,” he rejoined, rising. “ I’m going to ask for our coats.”

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This incident in Albert’s past life had not hitherto caused Bertha any disquietude, but

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now, although she refrained from further questions, her jealous instincts were aroused and she wished to set her mind at rest by having the matter fully thrashed out. Before marriage, Albert had given her the impression of being indifferent to everybody but her ; now she discovered he had enjoyed many pleasures she had not shared. He had changed from an ardent lover to a cold, calm husband ; perhaps, Bertha argued, his youth was already spent ; but she avoided questioning him except on the subject of his youth, when he would reply uneasily :

“ I’m younger now than in those days.”

Silent or talkative, asleep or awake, he wore a changed aspect. She had hoped that a community of interest would draw them closer to one another ; on the contrary, he was steadily drifting from her, and the object upon which her love had long been focussed grew fainter ; soon it would evade her entirely.

CHAPTER XII

TWO years after Bertha's marriage, Mme. Dégouy, not much caring where she lived, decided without consulting her daughter, and settled in a flat which Hortense had recommended in the rue Saint Jacques. On entering the street door, obstructed by a printer's shop, Bertha perceived at the farther end of the courtyard, a high red-brick house. She mounted the steep, shabby staircase quickly, and the concierge watched the smart visitor. Bertha was troubled by the contrast between her own and her mother's surroundings, and blamed herself for it.

Mme. Dégouy, sitting over the fire, still appeared well dressed in the gowns Hortense continued to make for her ; and the small room, with its remnants of luxury in the shape of a work table, a large silver teapot and blue carpet, reminded the visitor of Noizic and her childhood. Perceiving her daughter's uneasiness, Mme. Dégouy, to ease the situation, began to praise her new surroundings.

"In summer the trees will be lovely in front of my windows. I can see the Luxembourg if I lean out——" she led Bertha into the kitchen to see the various arrangements.

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"How clean it all is," Bertha exclaimed many times, knowing that this was the right thing to say.

"And my bedroom!" said Mme. Dégouy, standing in the dark passage. New curtains, photograph frames, and a small gas stove, all had to be admired.

"Yes, I am very comfortable here," she reiterated, sitting down by the fire, while her pretty hands in lace ruffles busied themselves with tea.

"Do you have friends to dinner sometimes?" asked Mme. Dégouy, leading the conversation on to a subject congenial to her daughter, who responded by relating whatever she thought would interest her mother.

"How is your husband?"

"He is quite well, thank you, mother, but very busy just now with an important case."

"So he is very busy . . ." said Mme. Dégouy, in vague approval; then she put on her spectacles, and, leaning forward a little, looked attentively at her daughter.

Bertha could have said much on the subject of Albert and herself, but she wished to hide her troubles from her mother, and confined herself to small talk which had no connection with her real existence.

"Why do you not go to Noizic? This house is so gloomy."

"I don't think so, my dear; I am very happy here, and you will come and see me. . . ."

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“ But at Noizic you would live in your old home ; you would see Emma and the grandchildren and your old friends, Mme. Chaurant and Mme. Ducroquet.”

Bertha concluded that her mother wished this lonely existence, and got up, feeling no further responsibility for her.

“ I must go and see Alice Bonifas, but I can stay a few minutes longer, if you like.”

“ No, you will be late,” said Mme. Dégouy, dismissing her daughter for fear of boring her, “ I want to finish a letter to Emma. You see I have begun it.”

Knowing she had stayed only a very short time, and had yielded very quickly to the idea of going, Bertha descended the stairs slowly, and thought of returning to her mother. She was not deceived by Mme. Dégouy’s pathetic attempt at gaiety ; each had concealed her troubles from the other. Bertha thought she discovered in her mother’s character, formerly so irritating, a certain resemblance to her own, as though Mme. Dégouy in later years had reverted to her original self ; and the daughter carried away from this visit a stronger affection for her widowed parent, joined to a feeling of pity for them both ; were they not of the same flesh and blood ?

“ Mme. Pacaris has been here to-day,” said Mme. Dégouy, when Hortense entered the drawing-room, and, smiling to herself, she fell again into dreamy silence.

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“ Am I changed ? ” Bertha asked, glancing at the mirror. “ Tell me the truth. Do you find a difference in me ? ”

“ I meant your dress—is it new ? ” said Alice Bonifas, smoothing her fair hair with a freckled white hand.

“ It’s awfully nice here—how quiet it is—in the centre of Paris, too ! Are you happy ? You do not feel lonely ? ” continued Bertha, who was trying to find the key to this secluded industrious life. “ But I asked you if you found me changed. It’s quite true—when one is young everyone remarks on one’s looks. I used to study my appearance to such an extent that one glance at the mirror the first thing in the morning was enough for me to decide what dress to wear. Now I can’t tell at all.”

“ No, you haven’t changed—quite as pretty—perhaps prettier, and a shade quieter.”

“ What do you mean ? ” Bertha asked, dropping her eyes.

“ You seem more indifferent. Before you were married you said we would often go out together to concerts and lectures. Well,” Alice went on, touching her friend’s bracelet, “ I don’t expect that. It is good of you to think of coming to see me.”

“ The first year of marriage is a very busy time,” Bertha rejoined, “ but I am not so tied now. I want to see the Louvre again ; I will come for you on Tuesday at two o’clock. No—I am engaged Tuesday ; I’ll send you a line.”

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"Your mother tells me you go out a great deal. You have a delightful life."

"No," said Bertha sadly, hoping thus to get on an easier footing with Alice, "I stay at home a good deal. Housekeeping is very tiresome, I can tell you. I cannot dismiss servants who have been there twenty years—even when they are lazy. I hardly dare give any orders, and of course I am responsible for all their shortcomings. You will find out some day that a husband is not always a convenience."



When Bertha reached home she ordered the fire to be lighted in the drawing-room, and Hugot, kneeling before the hearth, laid the firewood according to a rite which he explained to Bertha.

"It was at Marmande," he said, "at M. le Marquis de Casteljac's, that I learnt how to lay a fire."

To escape from his babble, Bertha opened a book, but instead of reading she meditated: "Perhaps Alice is right. I don't care so much for certain things now—novels bore me; at one time Albert used to bring me books and question me upon them; he used to admire my taste; does he take any interest in my reading nowadays?" and, as invariably happened when Albert was the subject, her thoughts followed the same tiresome channels: "Perhaps he is disappointed in me; he implies that in moments of anger; and it would explain

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his silence and reserve. I am not the same person ; I am uncertain, weak, irritable, sometimes violent ; perhaps I am even plain looking ; it seems as though what was bad in me, and what I have tried to overcome, comes to the surface and masters me. I'm not strong enough to reach his ideal ; I am only myself, and I'm at my worst now."

She tried to read, but her thoughts again strayed to her own unhappiness.

" You can't possibly see to read now, it is so dark," said Albert, switching on the light as he came in. He had brought some flowers for her.

" Here you are ! " she cried. " So soon ! And you won't have to go out again just yet, will you ?—what lovely flowers ! I'm so glad to see you. You don't know how glad."

Gloomy thoughts were now dispelled ; Bertha took the bouquet and drew a long breath to inhale their fragrance ; she was touched at his thoughtfulness and drew up an armchair, saying brightly :

" Sit down. It's not cold, but the fire is cozy ; it is a Marmande fire. You have no work to do, I hope ? "

" No, not just now. I should have gone to see Massicot at six o'clock, but I put it off till to-morrow. One must have a few moments respite sometimes."

" An hour ! " cried Bertha, taking his hand. " A whole hour all to ourselves ! "

" It is delicious," he said, leaning his head

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back, "to rest and forget. I hear Ensenat called to see me to-day. What did he want? Did he leave any message?"

"He didn't want anything," Bertha replied in order to dismiss the subject.

"I will go and see him to-morrow," said Albert, rising. "I'll be near the rue Grands-Augustins at four o'clock," he continued, touching an ornament on the mantelpiece, and looking at himself in the glass.

"Do sit down," said Bertha. "You seem unable to sit still."

He did as she bade him, and after a silence said

"Yes, it is more comfortable sitting down. Do you know what I was thinking? I was repeating word for word a letter that I wrote this morning—not an important one. The brain is a poor piece of mechanism."

"It's over-strain; why work till you are so exhausted? We are quite well enough off. One might think we were poor! Do you want to be famous as much as all that?"

"Good God! no!" said Albert. "I am not anxious for fame. I saw the futility of it in my father's case, and in that of certain of our friends. But one thing leads to another. I will give you an example. I didn't go to Massicot this evening; he wrote saying he would come to-morrow; he took the trouble to write—I can't see him, so I must answer his letter. You would not inconvenience a man of sixty-five for want of a letter? I must send it this evening."

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He went into his study and wrote the letter. A newspaper, which he had finished reading on his way home, lay on his table, but he read it again mechanically ; then he entered the dining-room and took out his watch.

" Well, Louise, what are you going to give us to eat ? Something good, I hope ? " he said, going into the kitchen as if impatient for dinner. Then he came back to his armchair in the drawing-room. Bertha came to his side, and, taking both his hands in her own, tried to soothe his nerves by the gentle pressure of her fingers.

" There . . . don't move."

They were silent, then Albert said :

" It is so difficult to rest. My father used to read in the evenings, but my eyes ache too much. I now understand why people go in for photography, games of patience and stamp-collecting—they are such restful occupations."

Laying her hand on Albert's tired face, Bertha said gently :

" Don't think of anything," and, shutting her eyes, she laid her head against his shoulder, realising that this precious hour, which should have been so happy, was all too quickly frittered away in desultory conversation, and left only a sense of emptiness. And this was the man whose coming was to cheer the household.

♦ ♦ ♦

" Quite so," said Albert, folding the brief. " Don't lose this—you must bring it to me tomorrow."

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"I can give you a lift in my car if you are going out," said his client, Gentillau.

"Thanks very much. I want to see a friend in the rue Grands-Augustins."

In the motor, Gentillau avoided the subject of his law-suit.

"I admire your ability to conduct so many cases at once," he said, without taking his eyes off his chauffeur.

"It is easier than you imagine ; a little method is all one needs."

"No doubt," said Gentillau, leaning suddenly out of the window to find out what was holding them up.

"Well, you think we have some chance of success ?"

"I think we have every chance," Albert replied, looking at himself in a narrow looking-glass, beneath a bunch of pinks.

Suddenly the car stopped.

"What is the matter ?" cried Gentillau.

"Oh ! nothing. A tram has come to a stand-still—perhaps there has been an accident ; if you don't mind, I will get out now, my street is just here."

Closing the door, Albert waved his hand to Gentillau, and joined a crowd standing round an empty tramcar.

"Is it a woman ? Is she dead ?" Albert asked his neighbour.

He looked round, and seeing Ensenat, touched him on the arm with his walking-stick, upon

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which Ensenat, edging his way through the crowd, joined his friend, saying, in a distressed whisper :

“ It’s horrible ! She was crossing the street.”

They walked on in silence, and Albert thought of Bertha ; he remembered she would not yet have reached home, and realised how profoundly attached he was to her.

“ I was just on my way to see you,” said Albert. “ You wished to see me ? ”

“ Yes,” replied Ensenat, still unnerved by the sight of death. “ I met Castagné yesterday morning ; he told me something very surprising—he has a mistress. . . . ”

“ Castagné ! Can it be possible ? ”

“ He will tell you about it. His wife knows—it is a most distressing affair.”

“ Castagné—I can’t believe it.”

“ Perhaps you know the lady ? Mme. de Boistelle. She goes to the Begouins a great deal.”

“ Oh ! the brute ! ” Albert exclaimed. “ What a nasty business ! ”

He drew Ensenat back to avoid an approaching motor-car, and continued :

“ I remember now that he was bored at home ; he married a woman who was too perfect.”

“ Have you ever noticed that his wife never pays him compliments ? ” said Ensenat, who was interested in newly-married people. “ His vanity is transparent—his head is easily turned. He only needs to be told that his eyes are beautiful.”

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"He was too sure of Odette," said Albert. "Before his marriage his love affairs were a perpetual torment ; he loses interest in a woman who never gives him a moment's anxiety."

Albert was silent ; he was eager to tell Bertha this news, and could picture her surprise.

"Are you coming with me ?" he asked, hastening his steps.

"No thanks. I must leave you here."

Albert ran upstairs quickly. Hugot, who was crossing the hall, recognised his master's step and opened the door.

"Has Madame come in ?"

"Yes," cried Bertha, running joyfully to meet him. "Madame has come in."

Albert took a letter from the tray and said, watching her intently :

"I am going to astonish you—Castagné has a mistress—Odette knows all about it."

Bertha thought : "That's the reason why he came upstairs so quickly—to tell me this . . ."

"It doesn't seem to interest you very much."

"Yes, it does," said Bertha. "How shocking ! Tell me more about it."

"That's all," said Albert, looking at the letter he held in his hand.

"Do please tell me more ; I can hardly believe it."

"I don't know anything more. I must answer this letter."

"You've always got letters to write," Bertha said, impatiently. "It's dinner time."

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Hugot opened the dining-room door as soon as Albert returned to the drawing-room.

"I had an idea something was wrong when I saw her on Monday," said Bertha, speaking in English, as Hugot removed her soup plate.

"You always have ideas when such things happen," Albert rejoined.

"Anyone could see she was not the wife for him," Bertha rejoined, following the servant with her eyes. When Hugot had withdrawn, she continued :

"It is quite easy to understand ; he needs to be loved, poor man, and Odette doesn't love him."

"I don't know what you mean," said Albert, testily.

"Odette is perfect, there is no doubt of it. She devotes herself to her house, her child, and her husband ; but her husband is no more to her than her house. Philip is a loving, sensitive creature. . . ."

"I don't understand," said Albert. "You think that Philip finds Odette cold, but I am sure he thoroughly appreciates her well-balanced mind. I'm sure of this, because I had the arranging of the marriage. I think we must regard it as an unexpected occurrence about which we know next to nothing—a momentary aberration. Odette has great regard for Philip. She doesn't worry him. . . ."

"He needs worrying," said Bertha hotly, disregarding Hugot's presence. "He needs

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tyranny, and at the same time the whole-hearted devotion of a woman who loves him."

Albert was silent, and hastened to finish dinner, guessing that, under the pretext of justifying Castagné, Bertha was complaining of his own indifference, and finding in her words signs of revolt ; in his irritation he disapproved of everything she said.

Afterwards, when they returned to the drawing-room, he slammed the door and continued :

"What I say is true. I know that women detest an argument, but this one is easy to understand. I said he married Odette because he admired her well-balanced mind ; there is nothing to account for his leaving her."

"He was unhappy. I know her—she is an icicle."

"You never keep to the point. I say that he married Odette because he admired her well-balanced mind, and there is nothing to account for his being unfaithful to her."

Bertha walked across the drawing-room, and he followed her step by step, into the bedroom, where she opened a wardrobe.

"A child could understand me. I say that he married Odette . . ."

Bertha went back to the sofa in the drawing-room, but got up again, and returned to her bedroom ; Albert still walked behind her.

"Are you incapable of reasoning ? All through dinner you avoided the point. I say that he married Odette because he admired her

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well-balanced mind—there is nothing to account for him leaving her.”

Bertha sat down by the table.

“ I tell you—listen carefully—it’s a question of logic. I say . . . ”

Bertha’s mind refused to work ; she was beaten down by his jerky, strident voice ; and Albert, though he perceived her confusion of mind, persisted in dinning the same thing into her ears, wounding and humiliating her, as if determined to crush something in her that he detested.

“ Perhaps you did not hear : I say that he married Odette because he admired her well-balanced mind. Can’t you answer me ? ”

Bertha appeared to be engrossed in unravelling a skein of silk. Vanquished, driven to the last extremity by this impossible argument, this cruel injustice, she cried out in a voice vibrating with hatred :

“ Let me alone ! ” But these words did not meet the occasion, and she seized a cut-glass scent bottle from her dressing-table and flung it at Albert, meaning to hit him on the shoulder. She missed her mark, however, and the bottle crashed against the chimney-piece.

Albert went silently and indifferently into the salon as if the discussion ceased to interest him. He took up a book by Tarde, which he could finish in three months by dint of half-an-hour’s reading every evening. Counting the number of pages again, he leant back in his armchair close to the lamp, and read :

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“ Is it possible to have a science, a history, or even a philosophy of society ? This question is always being asked, though, to tell the truth, if one looks at the matter closely from certain points of view, social facts like all others arrange themselves into series of similar facts or formulæ called laws which connect up these series. Why, then, has no such science appeared ? ”

He found it difficult to clear his mind of Bertha's mad look of anger as she threw the glass bottle, and he said to himself : “ I wanted to talk to her this evening. I hurried away from Ensenat in order to do so. I would rather talk to her than to anyone else, after all. But she is always insinuating things about me ; and in talking of Odette she was only putting forward her own grievances. What can we do to be happy ? What will be the end of it all ? And I need all my energy for my work.”

With aching head and oppressed mind he resumed his reading, conscious of fulfilling a necessary task in which he would not allow himself to fail in spite of the late hour, fatigue, and the hindrance of an unreasonable woman. Once more he tried to read :

“ When things of the same kind are parts of a great whole, one thinks of them as resembling the atoms in a volume of hydrogen, or as the tiny cells in the wood of a tree. . . .”

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In her room, letting down her hair and seating herself in a low chair, Bertha thought :

“ How easily I am exasperated ; I disgraced myself before him by giving way to violence.”

She tried to remember Albert’s words.

“ ‘I say,’ he kept on—‘I say’ What did he say ? All at once I felt giddy ; I can’t understand anything when I am upset. That’s what annoys him. He should have spoken more gently. But what fury, what spiteful looks. . . .”

She felt beaten and weary, humiliated by her her own want of self-control, and wretched at being so different from what Albert and she herself wished.

“ Why does he keep away from me ? What is he doing ? He oughtn’t to leave me alone when I am so unhappy.”

She sat down, lost in meditation ; then said to herself, suddenly :

“ What on earth is he doing ? ”

Going out by the bath-room door, she crossed the hall, and stepped noiselessly into the dark dining-room. She saw Albert reading in the drawing-room through the lace-curtained glass doors.

“ He can read peacefully like that,” she said, returning to her bedroom, “ when he has trampled upon me for a whole evening—hunted me down for his amusement, maddened me with his howls, because he hates me, and now he can read peacefully—quite pleased with himself.”

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She undressed quickly :

“ I will go to bed at once, and be asleep when he comes ; it is degrading to suffer for such a man. I regret my tears, and my scruples, even my love for him ; but I shall never care for him any more ; nothing shall affect me for the future. Yes—I will be asleep when he comes.”

She sat down and looked at the bed. Too worn out to undress, she waited, listening, her head turned towards the drawing-room door. How she longed to open it ! She looked at herself in the glass. What ? would she—half-undressed—be humble, she who had always maintained that a wife should keep her appearance up to the mark for her husband—would she go to him like this ? The door was drawing her. She had no idea what she would say—nor if she had anything to say, but felt that at all costs she must open that door.

On hearing his wife enter, Albert kept his eyes fixed on his book for an instant ; while, with hair hanging loose, she sat down in silence, and, like a poor frightened child, kept quite still in her chair.

“ She is good—really,” her husband thought, with a sudden rush of tenderness, but his emotion prevented him from looking at her ; he put down his book and said gently :

“ I think it must be very late. We ought to go to bed. We go to the Begouins to-morrow, you know.”

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He held her in his arms, pressing her close to him as he fell asleep, and her anguish disappeared in a sense of self-abandonment, of oneness with him, of blissful repose.

CHAPTER XIII

BERTHA was dressing in the brilliantly lighted room. She put a string of pearls in her hair, took it off, and replaced it again :

"It's ten o'clock—we shall be late," said Albert, who was shaving in the dressing-room.

"Do you like these pearls?" asked Bertha, as Albert came in.

"No," he replied.

"Why? You answer without looking."

"I don't like them."

"Men know nothing about that sort of thing. I wish you wouldn't bother me. You're awfully in the way."

"I'll wait in the drawing-room; we shall get to the Begouins at midnight again."

Bertha felt that the pearls displeased Albert because they were becoming. She thought: "He is afraid people will admire me too much; he would rather make me look ugly." She took them off. Perhaps her husband's taste influenced her.

"A husband makes one give in to his ideas; one loses one's individuality; one can't even dress as one likes."

Suddenly turning to her maid she said:

"This dress doesn't suit my coiffure. Get me the satin dress."

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Albert sat on the edge of the sofa, looking rather stiff in his evening dress. He held a newspaper before his face and examined his newly-polished finger-nails. Dignified and collected, in rustling silk—her dress became her wonderfully—Bertha slowly entered the drawing-room.

“I intend to leave early ; I have a good deal to do to-morrow.” Albert spoke quickly, without looking at his wife, as though this unusual splendour disturbed him.



Madame Begouin always talked to her guests in a confidential manner, and she took possession of Albert at once.

“I want you to do something for me,” she said. “You know de Perchot, the head of the Cabinet. I have a *protégé*—perfectly charming and so intelligent—who has just taken his degree. You will meet him here this evening—his name is Massip. . . .”

Seeking an excuse for getting out of helping her, Albert attentively questioned Mme. Begouin.

At that moment Puybérourx, an old friend, came up to them, and, shaking hands with Albert, said :

“I am delighted to see you.”

“We will talk again about this,” said Mme. Begouin, slipping away from them behind Mme. Puybérourx, who had been invited on account of her good looks.

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" You left far too soon the day before yesterday, M. Pacaris, did he not, Martin ? " said Mme. Puybérroux, speaking vivaciously to one of a group of men standing round her. " Come, tell me, Martin—did you go straight home ? "

" I went straight home as usual," replied Martin, whose prominent blue eyes appeared to bulge out under his pale lashes.

" No, Martin ; you didn't, you thought you'd risk it."

" You are talking very mysteriously," said Albert.

" Mme. de Thebes came directly you had gone. She examined Martin's hand and said to him, ' Go home at once ; without stopping anywhere.' "

" I heard a similar story," observed Albert, glancing at Martin's fingers, " one in which Mme. de Thebes figured, too. It seems that Noguèze, the pianist, was at her house. He was talking—one arm resting on the piano with his hand open, when Mme. de Thebes went up to him before everyone and said, ' Go home at once—do not stop a moment.' "

" You seem to be having a most interesting talk," said Mme. Begouin, coming up at that moment and taking Mme. de Puybérroux's arm. " But go down to my husband's study. Mme. Mongendre is going to sing ; you are talking too loudly."

Albert followed the Puybérrouxes and Martin into an adjacent room and sat down at a card-table.

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Bertha was about to join them when a lady came towards her with a smile. "Don't you remember me?" said Mme. Rey, "I met you at Mme. de Solanet's. Let us sit here, I think someone is going to sing. I have heard so much about your husband; it seems he is becoming quite a famous barrister—my husband told me so," she said, speaking more loudly. "He told me that M. Pacaris' defence of our friend Vignal was splendid. How thrilling it must be to hear one's husband plead in court."

"I have never heard Albert in court," Bertha rejoined, making an effort to respond to this warm volubility. She gave a cursory glance round the room until it reached the table at which Albert was sitting. Was it really of him that Mme. Rey had been speaking? She watched him without turning her head or seeming to look at him.

A man whom Bertha had specially noticed on account of his well-fitting clothes, advanced towards Mme. Rey. His small white wrinkled face, at once elderly and boyish, was drawn up as if he were about to cry, while a black lock stuck to his forehead as though he had just come out of the water. He kissed Mme. Rey's hand and looked at Bertha in a hesitating manner.

"M. le Couais," said Mme. Rey.

While Mme. Mongendre sang, Puybérour was silent. There was some applause in the room, and Mme. de Puybérour spoke to Albert,

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looking intently at him with a serious and intelligent expression, the charm of which she well knew: "These are undoubted facts; it is a science which is only beginning."

"You are fond of scientific study?" Albert asked her. "It is interesting—wonderful; but I should not have suspected you of caring for it. What a pity it is that we only care for truth when it is still veiled."

"My husband is extremely interested in the talk now going on about spiritualism," said Bertha, stopping in front of le Couais. "Does it interest you at all?"

"I think you know Mme. Lamorlette?" said le Couais slowly, "She has often spoken to me about you."

"Oh, has she? Then you know Mme. Lamorlette," cried Bertha, raising her voice as though she meant Albert to hear something that would annoy him. "I like her very much, only unfortunately I scarcely ever see her."

"People say she is eccentric," rejoined le Couais, "but she is really delightful; she has a most charming house. . . . I am a great lover of antiquity. . . . I live in the Ile Saint Louis. When I stroll along at dusk and see the Quai D'Orsay station opposite the Louvre! . . ." M. le Couais's clean-shaven face expressed his disgust.

"Have you noticed this piece of marquetry?" Bertha asked, moving towards Albert and continuing to talk to le Couais in an anxious and

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determined manner. " I think it is Italian." She let her eyes rest on Albert. He was talking to Mme. Puybérourx with all the animation, eager attention, even with the little rapid gestures she had always so admired. He looked a different man entirely, as she watched him with this unknown person, engaged in a conversation of which she could not hear a word. It appeared that the smallest distance, the slightest thing—a dress brushing between them—was enough to destroy ties which had seemed so strong. She said to herself bitterly :

" If he were a more ordinary sort of man, a more earthly kind of creature, I should feel he was more securely bound ; but these cold men, these intellectuals, can be alienated by one little thought, a single idea."

" Excuse me," said Albert earnestly, his gaze fixed on Mme. Puybérourx. " It is no use looking for justice in morality. An immoral man who succeeds enjoys his success and his conscience doesn't trouble him. But," Albert continued, observing a lady looking at him who reminded him of Odette, " he gets punished, nevertheless. He doesn't think himself wicked, but he's an outcast, doomed to eventual unhappiness. . . . Who is that woman sitting beside Mme. Mongendre ? What lovely eyes she has ! "

" Mme. de Boistelle."

" Do you know her ? "

" Edward knows her, I believe," replied Mme.

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de Puybérroux, turning towards her husband, who had entered the room as they were speaking.

"Puybérroux, will you introduce me to Mme. de Boistelle?" said Albert.

"Do you really want to meet her? she's a nobody."

"She interests me," Albert replied, following Puybérroux across the room.

He bowed to Mme. de Boistelle, once more remarking her strange likeness to Odette; but she smiled and her face instantly became vulgar.

"I've heard a lot about you," she said with an accent to match her smile. Then she was silent, raising her beautiful eyes to Albert, and the likeness to Odette reappeared.

Albert withdrew, and approaching Bertha, said in a low tone, "Let's go."

"Why—we have only just come," she rejoined.

"I know their chocolate—not fit to drink. Do let's go—it's difficult to find a cab about here. I have a lot of work to do to-morrow. I don't want to go to bed late. What a curious likeness there is to Odette in that Mme. de Boistelle."

In the cab Albert sat silently, thinking of his conversation with Mme. de Puybérroux.

Bertha was accustomed to Albert's habitual silence after talking a lot. Nevertheless, on this occasion, in view of the events of the evening, she chose to consider his silence a personal affront.

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A swift glance at his wife's face showed Albert that her nerves were over-wrought, and he thought bitterly : " She's always like this when we go out together " ; then, remembering that he had to plead in court for Gentillau the next morning, " I must keep calm to-night " ; he was conscious of the annoying figure beside him and of the atmosphere of aversion that already enveloped them. He drew nearer to the door as though Bertha took up too much space beside him in the cab, and watched the passing street lamps, " Above all, there mustn't be a scene to-night. I must sleep well."

Bertha grew weary of Albert's silence, and knowing instinctively what would most annoy him, she said :

" You are thinking of Mme. de Boistelle, I suppose ; I am sure you looked at her enough."

" So that's how you have been tormenting yourself for the last ten minutes ? What insane jealousy ! " cried Albert, his hands twitching. " Sulking because I speak to a woman who interested me on account of Castagné . . . a woman I didn't know yesterday and whom I don't care if I never see again."

He knew Bertha was not thinking of Mme. de Boistelle, and that she had only fired a random shot in her vague uneasiness, but he seized on this petty detail, and shouted, half-rising out of his seat :

" Mme. de Boistelle ! So I am not even allowed to speak to Mme. de Boistelle. It's too absurd

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—a person I have only seen once, just for a moment. We had better stay at home after this. I'll become a monk and hide myself in a cloister ; I'm not even to say how-do-you-do."

" I am sure I don't bother myself about your how-do-you-dos," cried Bertha.

" Oh, marriage is delightful," Albert continued bitterly ; " at home if one dares to open a book one is reproached for being silent ; if one goes out and ventures to converse for a minute or two it is treason. Is this to go on for life—for all one's life ? "

" Now I know what he really thinks. His whole attitude declared all this before, only I wouldn't understand him," thought Bertha, wild with grief, moving as far away from Albert as she could. " Is he conscious of my existence . . . did he give me one single look this evening ? At home he thinks of nothing but his work—anything that will take him away from me. When he is tired or bothered I have to bear the brunt of it. He has avoided me since the very first day we were married. How unkind he was yesterday evening. . . . What hatred there was in his eyes ! I don't count at all in his life . . . he belongs to everyone but me. . . . It's dreadful never to find any warmth, any tenderness where one loves. He freezes me, and there is a gloom over everything—he is coarse, hard, egotistical."

She thought of her dream of a perfect union born of the passionate ardour which had

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formerly existed between them and had appeared so wonderful.

"He has destroyed it all ! He has delighted in destroying it because it was rare. In his heart he really likes nothing but suffering ; he simply doesn't know what joy is, and this wretched atmosphere of misery suffocates me. He has enticed me into a trap and I can't get out ; I shall always have to suffer."

She leaned against the door of the cab and clutched the handle as though she meant to fling herself out into the road, murmuring : "Brute, brute. . . ."

"There you go with your exaggerated phrases," Albert remarked with calm acidity. "You said, 'Are you thinking of Mme. de Boistelle ?' and I answered, 'What insane jealousy !' I may have been rather rude, but I am not a brute."

"I ought to have known better," Bertha said to herself. "When I love him—when I am happy—I'm merely deceiving myself."

The cab stopped and Bertha hurried into the house. Albert hunted for a coin he had dropped on the pavement, and climbed the stairs slowly and went to his study in order to give Bertha a little time to recover herself. The Gentillau brief lay open on the table ; he opened it and tied it up again, when he caught sight of a book he had just had re-bound. He recollected that his father had always read at night, and the recollection made him thoughtful for a moment ;

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then he went into the bedroom. He saw that Bertha had curled herself into a corner of the bed as though she were asleep. Longing to end their quarrel and secure a night's rest, he went up to her.

"Look here!" he began gently. "What on earth is the matter? Do tell me, for goodness sake. We can't go on like this."

She kept quite still, with eyes staring in front of her. "Could he understand me?" she wondered.

"Can't you speak to me?" he asked; then began to undress. "This will pass off," he thought, and tried to imagine himself alone. But when the light was out and he was in bed he felt, without touching her, that Bertha was awake, and said to himself: "She doesn't move or speak; I'll pretend I think she is asleep and that I am alone in the bed."

To calm his mind and induce the sleep which refused to come, he repeated to himself the fable of "The Fox and the Crow." But a shudder ran through him, an emanation, as it were, from the motionless figure beside him, and jumping out of bed, he shouted: "This is madness!" He switched on the electric light. "Will you explain yourself and make an end of it? You said 'You're thinking about Mme. de Boistelle'; I answered, 'Your jealousy is absurd.' And because of such a silly trifle you behave like a lunatic—or am I going mad?"

Bertha listened to his arguing—it was all so

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far from the point. Albert sat down in his chair. The presence of this half-crazy woman who would not speak lent an air of unreality to his surroundings. "My life is horrible," he thought, and felt as though his very face must be changing under so much suffering and that Bertha would be touched by the change. He got up and looked at the bed, but the bare thought of returning to lie there filled him with horror, and he slowly dressed himself.

He went into the drawing-room and turned on the electric light, sat down on a sofa, and, seeing a newspaper on the floor, he recalled the moment when Bertha had entered the drawing-room in her satin evening dress. "What a long time ago that seems!" There was a strangeness and solemnity in this silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock. He thought bitterly: "Gentillau to-morrow—a lot she cares about my work; she thinks of nothing but her own silly nonsense. How wretched it all is! Her state of mind affects my own terribly—I feel as though I were breaking up; nothing seems certain—I have no support anywhere—I care for nothing. The very room looks unreal. What on earth is the use of living together if the slightest thing shakes life to its foundations? And why, after all, should these things upset me? Surely I have lived alone too long—been self-reliant too long to allow my whole existence to become disorganised by the follies of a neurotic woman."

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He went into his office and seated himself at the table.

"I'll get to work," he said, taking up the Gentillau brief : "Morin works all night ; why shouldn't I ?"

He re-read some of his notes and his fatigue disappeared.

"I'll find something better than that," he thought, finding his perception of subtle abstract points clearer under this slight mental excitement.

He forced himself to read a chapter of an old law book, but a continual buzzing in his ears, the night's cool freshness, the shadow outside the circle of lamplight on the table, even the intense stillness of the house, made him restless, and he turned repeatedly towards the door to listen to imaginary movements in the corridor, while now and then he fancied he heard the rustle of an unseen presence. Rising at length, he returned to the bedroom, got into bed in the dark and went to sleep.



Albert hastily grasped his father's old leather case, darkened by use, and went into the dining-room.

"Get me something quickly," he said to Hugot, without looking at Bertha, whose mood seemed unchanged. He had given up all idea of altering his speech although he was dissatisfied with it in its present form. "What I needed

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was an hour of quiet," he told himself, and he mechanically repeated some of its phrases, as he bolted his breakfast and watched the time.

With mind suddenly benumbed, almost vacant, he gazed out of the window of the motor which took him to the Courts ; as he slowly mounted the great stone staircase he felt that he was growing old. Disgust took possession of him :

" After all I've only seen her to-day just for a moment," he reflected, still thinking of Bertha. " Why on earth should the memory of a moment spoil one's whole day ? "

♦ ♦ ♦

" Is M. Pacaris at home ? " Castagné asked in a subdued tone.

Hugot silently opened the door of the drawing-room, and Castagné went in.

" Albert may come at any moment," Bertha said rapidly. " He is in Court to-day ; he went away soon after breakfast. Ah, here he is. . . . I thought I heard the key. . . . No . . . it is not he after all. You must stay to tea," she urged without knowing why, but he remained standing in the middle of the room and said gravely : " No, thank you."

Bertha wondered whether she ought to inquire about Odette, but feared if he were questioned he might suspect some allusion to their conjugal drama. Did he think Albert had been told ? To hide her uneasiness, she hurried on :

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"Do stay for tea, won't you? Shall I ask M. Vagnière what time Albert is likely to return? If you miss him I will tell him you have been. He will write to you."

"He need not write; I will look in again to-morrow."

"You will be sure to find him in about five—I will tell him to expect you. . . . It is so odd. . . . I seem to be always hearing him . . . the sound of his key . . . but it is not he. Then at last it really is his key and in he comes."

"How careless and happy she is . . . able to babble about anything," thought Castagné. "What joy to be at peace like that."

"You seem very cosy here," he said, his eyes travelling round the room.

In this peaceful atmosphere he breathed freely—the first time for three days that he had done so.

"How quiet it is," he exclaimed, touching the hangings. "These walls are thick . . . real walls! Old houses are the best to live in."

"Do let me tempt you," said Bertha, taking up the teapot.

"I must be off. Ensenat expects me at six o'clock."

His thin face seemed to contract and become thinner at the bare idea of again seeing Ensenat, the timid visionary with his dreams and warnings.

"I'll come to-morrow at five," said Castagné.

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“ Won’t you come in this evening, after dinner ? ”

“ No,” Castagné replied nervously. “ I will come to-morrow.”

Bertha went to her room and drew up a little armchair to the fire. “ Poor Odette ! I have been very forgetful—I must go and see her to-morrow,” she thought, recalling Castagné’s anxious expression. Her conscience pricked her about Odette, and she said to herself : “ One allows oneself to be upset by trifles, and how absurdly trivial they all are compared with real misfortune. I annoyed Albert yesterday by appearing jealous though I didn’t really believe there was any cause—just for the sake of wounding him. . . . I am not worthy of him. . . . It is all my own fault, and it’s very naughty of me.”

She longed to recover herself ; to lead an active life, in which each hour was employed,—self-satisfying as those childish days when she had pinned to her bedroom wall a neatly-written time-table to regulate her work, when Marie-Louise sat at her feet, and they warmed their hands together and whispered confidences. She bent over the fire while the last glimmer of daylight coloured the windows.

The door opened and the lights were switched on ; Albert gave Bertha a quick look.

“ Come and sit here,” she said sweetly. Her repentant manner touched him and he said : “ It feels very warm in here—don’t you find it too warm ? ” As soon as he had sat down, Bertha

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said seriously : “ It seems to me, my dear, that it won’t do to let trifles come between us again. I was tired and nervy last night after going out ; I said stupid things which hurt you—things I didn’t mean at all—just on the surface, you know. It was wrong of me to hurt you.”

“ I was angry and answered like a fool,” rejoined Albert, also repentant.

“ How strange it is,” Bertha went on, pleased to interest him even by speaking of herself severely. “ One says these horrible things one doesn’t mean, though at the moment one thinks one is sincere. You were perfectly right. . . . I am too self-centred. I ought to lead a different life. I’ll get up early and go out more ; take up some of the interesting things I used to do as a young girl. All I ask of you is to give me a little more of yourself. . . .”

“ Yes,” said Albert, remembering how little time he had given to his wife. “ Yes . . . I certainly will.”

Clasping hands and drawing near to one another in a close embrace, they blotted out past misunderstandings. Later, in the dining-room, as she sat down, Bertha said :

“ Castagné called to see you ; he will come again to-morrow at five o’clock.”

“ Didn’t he leave any message ? ”

“ No ; but his face said enough. I am very surprised that Odette hasn’t been to see me and talk things over ; I shall go and see her to-morrow ; she must know that we know everything.”

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"It's quite likely that Castagné has not been home since the event," said Albert ; he looked at Bertha and continued :

"I met Pageot and he asked after you. They are going to Biarritz for Easter."

Albert decided he would not read that evening ; he sat down in an armchair and went on talking to his wife, but Bertha, feeling the constraint he suffered on her behalf, went into her bedroom, leaving the door open, and began a letter to Emma. But somehow she could not write, and she came back and sat on Albert's knee. Silent and wearied with past emotions, she put her lips to his ; then, opening her eyes, she saw the reflection of his face in a mirror ; he appeared to be thinking calmly. She got up and sat near the fire.

"You are right in thinking that married women should preserve their relations with the rest of humanity," her husband remarked. "They should go out and interest themselves in outside affairs ; it isn't right to live shut up in oneself—one becomes soured and too introspective. And I don't think men can get on without keeping well in touch with the world. . . . I noticed this in reading Genévrier. . . . What he has to say is spoiled by his solitary meditations ; he wanted stirring up by ordinary people."

"He is afraid of my loving him too much," thought Bertha, taking up her work again, and driving back with a touch of shame certain feelings which had surprised her.

CHAPTER XIV

SEATED at her little writing-table, near the open window in the sunshine, Bertha was adding up her accounts, when the door-bell rang, and Odette walked in, her large eyes full of anxiety.

"I was passing your house," she said, "and thought I would look in to ask you to come out with me. I want to go to the Champs-Élysées. It's such a fine day. We might go into the Bois ; it's only ten o'clock."

"Delighted," said Bertha. "I'll put on my hat."

"Do you never go out in the morning?" Odette asked, looking at herself in the mirror. "Very soon it will be impossible to go out alone. Men follow one so ; have you discovered that?"

Bertha sat down and held out her foot to Elizabeth, who had just brought her boots.

"I always admire your ankles," said Odette ; as she looked down at her own feet. "Fourcade made these shoes for me ; sixty francs. They fit well, don't they ? Shoes, stockings and petticoats are weaknesses of mine. Do you like this coat ? It is rather uncommon, the latest thing. I like the present style of dress—don't you ?"

"Is your husband out?" asked Odette nervously.

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"Albert went out early this morning; he didn't come back to lunch. Did you want to speak to him?"

"I want him to give me some information."

"Did you come last night?"

"No."

Bertha opened the window, saying, as she followed Odette out of the room: "But the concierge said . . ."

"Oh, yes, I did come, I'd forgotten," muttered Odette, "only you were out."

"No, I was in. I always come home at six o'clock; it's a good thing to rest before dinner."

* * *

Under the chestnut-trees, women, dressed in light summer clothing, sauntered to and fro, watching the stream of carriages full of well-dressed people talking and laughing gaily; their bright sunshades made vivid patches of colour. Spring was in the air and in people's hearts.

"Do your people know anything?" Bertha asked.

"My brother is the only one who has any idea of it. I could not have believed it was so easy to hide such a thing from one's people. I am waiting—it's much better to wait. Philip has never been more charming. We pretend to have forgotten everything, and our life is a lie which deceives neither of us."

"He doesn't see her now?" Bertha whispered, sending away a child who was offering them flowers.

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“Men are impossible,” Odette burst out suddenly, “hateful—all of them—yes, I mean it! All of them—we only think we know them!”

“But did you never suspect anything? Was he pre-occupied and silent?”

“You saw us,” said Odette; “was there ever a more united couple? not a single misunderstanding for five years and not a cloud. He was a most attentive husband; couldn’t bear to leave me, even for two days. If you could see the letters he wrote me from Valence! I know quite well that he loves me; in his heart of hearts he loves only me. And why shouldn’t he? Am I not beautiful? Others think so, at any rate.”

“What excuses does he make?” said Bertha. “I suppose he tries to justify himself?”

“He says I don’t think enough of him and his art, and that I leave him too much alone.”

“Oh!” said Bertha, deeply interested and wearing a pensive look as she thought of Albert.

“He invents absurd reasons,” Odette went on passionately. “Men are very clever at finding good excuses for their bad behaviour. They will go to any length to hide their true character.”

Bertha would have liked to pity her cousin more, or at least to say something consoling to this new Odette whom she hardly recognised, and whose outbursts of despairing hate, alternating with proud defiance, disconcerted her, but her own sense of insecurity checked any

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expression of sympathy and terrified her. She went on questioning Odette :

“ Does your husband go out every morning ? ”

“ He went out this morning, to see Naudin—” then she repeated, as if speaking to herself : “ He said he was going to see Naudin.”

“ I don’t think I can go as far as the Bois,” said Odette. “ I haven’t time. What a donkey I am ! Margaret is expecting me. Do excuse my forgetfulness ! ” She held up her sunshade to hail a taxi. “ Only yesterday she told me her mother was to have an operation this morning.”

Odette took great pains to explain to Bertha why she must go to Margaret, evidently inventing the details, and Bertha wondered at this strange propensity for untruthfulness which had been growing on her cousin for some time.

So Bertha went alone to the Bois, walking on the soft earth reserved for the riders ; then she crossed the carriage-road and followed a path among the trees. She watched a couple just ahead of her ; the woman held her red sunshade with proud assurance, and the man, suiting his step to hers, kept on the edge of the path, and bent his head attentively towards his companion.

Bertha sat down on a bench ; the undergrowth was flecked with sunlight, and an expanse of water gleamed through bare tree trunks. In the distance a line of passing carriages could be seen. Continuing her walk, she saw

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the red sunshade again, and the melancholy, awakened by her conversation with Odette, returned. Only too well was she acquainted with that adoring expression on a man's face ; she too had been idolised. " Now," she reflected, " I am withered by his pitiless scorn. The eyes that once gazed at me passionately now scrutinise me unmercifully to find out my weakest points, until I am in the depths of misery. He used to say, ' How vigorous you are ! ' But it is he who is vigorous—to the point of cruelty ! He is self-sufficient, and he doesn't need me ; perhaps I am a burden to him ; I'm the weak one ; it is I who need help, and I ought not to expect him to love me when I am so changed."

Retracing her steps, she left the path by the carriage-drive, as though the sight of her fellow creatures were unendurable, and followed a track through the woods. She came to a grass plot where children played, and she stopped for a moment to look at the littlest ones, thinking how completely children live in a world of their own. Then she went back to her solitary lunch ; in the drawing-room, afterwards, she looked about her ; she flicked a little dust from a book with her finger, changed the position of a cushion. Somehow or other things were not to her liking, so she rang for Hugot.

" Are you having your lunch ? Well, since you are here, just move the sofa into this corner." She touched it with her finger-tips as she spoke, as though helping him to move it. " There—

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that will do very well. Now go back to your lunch." However, she detained him to push the table against the wall, alter the carpet, and move two armchairs nearer the fireplace.

"Very good . . . Thank you . . . now go and finish your lunch."

She sat on the piano stool and studied the changed aspect of the room. There was a vacant space beneath M. Pacaris' portrait, and she put a small table there, and fetched a blue vase out of the hall.

"Not bulky enough," she said to herself.

The furniture looked more important in its new setting, and, struck by its ugliness, Bertha cried : "How absurd those doors are. It's impossible to do anything in a room with such doors. It was better before." She went into her bedroom to drink a daily tonic that Odette had recommended. Opening the wardrobe she dropped a box of pins, and, sitting on her bed, she spread its contents on the counterpane, took up the pins one by one and placed them according to size in small compartments, thinking as she did so : "I feel the want of a friend. I like Alice very much, but she is not married and would never understand me. She would only be curious. As for Odette, she would recognise her own trouble. One has to be so careful with other women ; one must never mention the skeleton in the cupboard. They are all spies, without meaning to be, under a cloak of affection. The least hint at the truth—an expression

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of sadness—is eagerly, almost joyfully, seized upon, for it's like an admission of failure, a sort of disgrace.”

She sat down at her table to make a list of the pins she required, and her engagement book reminded her that this was Mme. Roinart's “At Home” day, and that a call was owing. It was pleasant to stay at home arranging her belongings, but she rang for Elizabeth. Then she felt suddenly tired, and decided to remain at home. She took off her dress, put a lace shawl over her shoulders, fetched a box of gloves from the wardrobe, and sorted out the best pairs. The glass which had contained her tonic was still on the table, and, mechanically, she carried the tray into the kitchen, thus following the example set by Mme. Dégouy, who was always putting things to rights. She remembered having said to her: “One would think you had no servants.”

“Poor mother! I often made fun of her, and now we are very much alike.”

Bertha had not seen her mother for some days. “I will go to-day,” she said to herself, determining to pay a long visit; she would be kind and loving to make up for her past behaviour.

However, she decided to call on Mme. Roinart first, and then to Prom's, and to Viel's for some scent. Looking in the glass, she was surprised to find herself so pale.

“How changed I am—not nearly so pretty.”

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She tried to look at herself with a stranger's eyes. She drew her hair down over her forehead ; it was the way she had worn her hair the year before, and she endeavoured, with half-closed eyes, to recall the face she used to see ; then, sitting down before the dressing-table, she rubbed her face with a piece of wet cotton-wool, and asked for her brown boots. With bare arms, she put on her hat, arranged her veil, and, as a result of these feminine manœuvres, regained confidence in her beauty. Her thoughts wandered to stately old Mme. Roinart, in her beautiful drawing-room. Had she ever had a lover ? and, if so, why had her husband never found it out ? and she remembered the respectful tone in which the Quatrefages always spoke of Mme. Roinart.

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“ The evenings come round so quickly, and one has done nothing,” said Albert, taking up a book.

Now that it was easily accomplished, his professional work, which occupied the whole day, became uninteresting. The only occupation which seemed important was this laborious evening reading, and in this he was constantly interrupted.

“ Have you been to see Madame Viguiier ? ” he inquired.

“ Yes, I called on Madame Viguiier and Madame de Solanet.”

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" I think you look much better now that you go out more."

" Well, my looks are deceptive. I am tired out. This morning, when I was doing my hair, I had a most uncomfortable sensation. My hand was quite stiff as I held the comb ; I could not open my fingers and my eyelids were burning."

" I believe you are a little changed. You've got a good colour, but you're too thin. Do consult Natte ; and try to go out every day for a constitutional."

Seating herself near the fireplace, with her feet on a tapestry footstool, Bertha took up her work. " Madame Viguiet has invited us to dinner next week to meet the Heriards."

" We go out too much. That's why you are always so tired. If Ensenat does not come in this evening I shall go to bed early." Albert opened his book, as though to avoid useless conversation, but continued : " Do you like Charlotte Lamorlette very much ? "

" She amuses me," replied Bertha, looking down and carefully cutting a thread of silk.

" I don't know how anyone so foolish can possibly amuse you."

" Charlotte is no more of a fool than Madame de Solanet."

" Really ! " said Albert slowly, looking narrowly at his wife. " You don't think that woman a fool ? "

His look was so penetrating that Bertha rose from her chair, put her scissors on the mantel-piece, and glanced in the mirror.

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"You can appreciate Ensenat's cleverness," resumed Albert, "and yet you do not see that Charlotte Lamorlette is silly beyond words."

"You judge people from one point of view," Bertha retorted. "She is certainly rather frivolous, but very bright, and she is a good soul."

Bertha bent over her work, and Albert observed the nervous contractions of her foot in its thin shoe.

"She has a charming laugh," he admitted. "It is curious that women can appreciate intelligence but do not recognise stupidity when they meet it."

"Charlotte is very lively," Bertha retorted vehemently, "and you can't stand that. You take such a serious view of life, at any rate where I am concerned. It's impossible to breathe in this house, and, if wisdom is so stifling, I much prefer fools and idiots who know how to laugh."

Albert paced up and down the room, pondering her words.

"In the first place, you must realise that if you are stifled here it is not my fault. I have done my best to suggest amusements. It is bad for you to live too much alone; I have often said so. As to Madame Lamorlette, she can laugh if she likes. It is not a question of liveliness—or even of happiness. Is it possible that anyone, with even a small amount of brain, is capable of being such a silly fool? That is the question—I reply: No."

"There you are again, with your eternal

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criticism ! You don't like a woman to think of her own happiness. What should she think of, then ? ”

“ Of course,” said Albert, “ we all expect happiness, and it is due even to stupid people. But it isn't surprising that you find life disappointing when you have such ridiculous notions in your head.”

“ How soon you lose your temper ! You always want to argue, and you have such a loud voice that you can talk me down. I never get a word in because I am your wife. You never let me speak ; if one of your friends were talking to you, how attentively you would listen. You are the most patient, gentlest, most flattering of men with other people. But I am always in the wrong ; and if I don't agree with you you crush me utterly. You are not sincere, you play a part in order to exasperate and tyrannise over me.”

“ No,” said Albert, lowering his voice—
“ Listen to me . . . ” and he sat down close to Bertha. “ I am perfectly honest with you ; I know quite well that a few hasty words said in a moment of irritation are often taken for one's real opinions. Deep-rooted bitterness or self-conceit, unaccountable reactions of feeling obscure our judgment ; temperament triumphs over reason. Swayed by these potent influences, I often wonder what are my real opinions ? Well, when I speak to you, or rather, when I speak to myself in your presence, I feel that my

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mind extricates itself from these confused thoughts, and is soothed. You help me to find the way to my true self, my logical self. . . . You were speaking of Charlotte. You think I want to impose restrictions . . . prevent you—no, I don't want anything of the sort. What I say is that if one possesses a certain inward fastidiousness one instinctively shuns vulgarity, mediocrity and falsehood—even the falsehood of illusions. This comes naturally to a wholesome, refined mind, which can only live in pure air. . . . I recollect Maurisset describing his method of work ; he imposed restrictions on his style which astonished my people, and only used words that were in an old dictionary. My mother said to him : ' You're smothering your talent.' Well, after all, he was right. They thought his ideas were a stupid hindrance, but he persevered, and this is why his writing is so vital. By his endurance and his restraint he produced more perfect work. It seems to me that what we call good . . . ”

Bertha still bent over her embroidery thinking : “ He says all this just because he doesn't like my being friends with Charlotte.”

Albert opened his book at the marker, but read only a few lines ; he could not concentrate and re-read the passage several times. Not having touched the book for two days, he had forgotten the context, and began again further back.

“ When you are thinking so much about your

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book why don't you think aloud?" Bertha asked. "I could then follow your reading."

"My thoughts are very vague," replied Albert, putting the book down on his knees, rather glad to be interrupted in a tedious passage. "My thoughts would be meaningless apart from the book. It's a very difficult one, and you haven't much notion of philosophy."

"There is the door bell," said Bertha, taking her feet off the footstool. Albert looked at his watch. "It's Ensenat."

Ensenat sat down absent-mindedly, close to Bertha; then he changed his mind and went over to the table.

"Have you news of Castagné?"

"Bad news," replied Albert. "Reconciliations are impossible. She won't give up her husband, and he seems to want both of them. And the violence of those scenes! You wouldn't believe it possible for a placid girl like Odette to display such passion."

"That is just my opinion," said Ensenat, opening a book on the table, and adding bitterly: "Neither of them was ill-natured; marriage has turned them into monsters."

There was a far-away look in his eyes as they wandered over the objects of the room, and he said, after a silence: "That book is boring and useless."

"I know you prefer a more consoling point of view," said Albert, rising. "But I find this one too consoling, too much adapted to our

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needs, too useful to be applied to things which are a little beyond us."

"It is wrong to speak of the consolation of religion," said Ensenat, and, in a low voice, he added: "Say rather the terrible truths of Christianity." Then, speaking to himself, his eyes fixed and his expression suddenly graver, he continued: "They must be truths."

Whenever Albert discussed these subjects with Ensenat, he felt that his own opinions, usually a little vague, were strengthened by opposition and became certainties for him. That evening, hastening to end the conversation, he looked at his watch and spoke carelessly behind Ensenat's chair: "You say truth. Isn't it a question, even with you, of desire rather than truth?"

"You believe in humanity," said Ensenat, without looking at Albert. "I give you five or six years. Some day what interests you now will cease to have any attraction and people will weary you. Then another day will come when all past joys and your pitiful love of life will seem as if they had never existed. When you face death, midway between an empty past and an empty future, you will perhaps have leisure to reflect on the blunder of your existence. If there is any substantial enduring thing in your life it should be cultivated at once and with all your energy."

He looked at Bertha, who gently took a glass from the tray, and he smiled as he caught her

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eye, as if to ask pardon for such serious talk ; but she placed the glass by him gravely, as if totally absorbed by what they were saying.

♦ ♦ ♦

“ Ensenat is a very sympathetic man,” Bertha remarked, stopping thoughtfully in the middle of her bedroom. Albert shut the window and threw himself on the couch, where he remained lying at full length with closed eyes.

Bertha let down her hair before the glass, and with a mechanical movement, repeated every night, dropped the hairpins one by one into a metal tray. All at once she looked fixedly at herself, dimly imagining her appearance as a child, and then as an old woman.

“ One cannot help wondering about life sometimes ; the thought of it makes one’s head reel,” she said, turning towards Albert, her face framed in loosened hair, which gave a strangely girlish expression to her regular features.

Albert got up from his sofa and began to unlace his boots.

“ You never seem to think about life,” said Bertha, “ I mean the serious side of it—and death. People appear to regard their daily occupations, and even the words they utter, as life ; and the average woman’s daily round is so insignificant.”

Sitting down on the edge of the bed she became silent for a moment, then continued : “ Sometimes I long for a book—a book to read

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constantly—which would never be finished, even when read.”

“ It is easy to find such a book. I have suggested several from time to time.”

“ No, I want a book to tell me about myself.”

“ A book by some great moralist would suit you.”

With these words Albert passed into the drawing-room with noiseless, slippered tread, and switched on the light. He ran his eyes along a row of books, rejecting one after another ; he ended by choosing one at random, and, putting out the light, he groped for the door handle.

“ I think I have found the very thing.”

“ I have read it,” said Bertha, glancing at the volume.

“ Then I will find you the Imitation.”



One Sunday, as Albert was washing his hands after returning from a walk, he frowned at himself in the glass, and went back to the drawing-room to read Faguet’s daily article.

“ I see you are not thinking about what you are reading,” Bertha said to him.

“ I know ; I am thinking of poor Saviot’s death.”

“ Did you ever know him ? ”

“ I was at school with him ; you met him at the Blanchemins’. I said to him that very day : ‘ Take care. These machines are dangerous,’ but he thought he was careful enough, and

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never dreamt of death," said Albert, getting up and going to the bookcase.

"I want to find something of Schopenhauer's, which I like very much. Here it is," and he read the following: 'Look at your dog, quiet and happy by your side. Millions of dogs have died in order that this one may live, but the species survives, and your dog is as strong and virile as though he were endowed with eternal life. When death comes we say that his shadow, his image has died, not the dog.'

After a silence, Albert went on to say: "That ought to be enough for us. After all, what is death?" and leaning his head back, he closed his eyes—"To forget."

"Be still!" said Bertha, putting her hand over his eyes, as though to put an end to his imaginings. "My God! if that were to happen I should die. You are my life."

Half-kneeling, she leant over her husband and touched his arm, as if to make sure of his bodily presence. "We are so absolutely one," she murmured. "If you died I should quite simply cease to breathe. I should not die of grief; my existence would just automatically come to an end. It is strange, but you are so entirely a part of me that I could not live without you; and yet sometimes I think I have never really held you in my arms—never really known you—the day passes, and all one thinks of is paying some bill or writing a letter; one goes out. We ought to stop and think quietly

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sometimes—feel that we love one another—put it into words—say something which really expresses our enduring affection for each other. Without that, one has misgivings. We live a little like people who don't love each other. I am not even sure that you are happy. You would not have talked like that about death if you were. If you should die I would always torture myself with the thought that I did not make you happy."

"When I allude to my death," said Albert, lowering his eyes, "you think only about yourself, and my love for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," and he got up from his chair.

"Where are you going? Wait a moment; it is just tea-time; surely you won't leave me on Sunday?"

Albert sat down again, and Bertha continued:

"I have been thinking—I feel as if we were so far apart, separated by such different interests. You always have your work to occupy your mind, and you really enjoy it. I don't blame you on that account. But why is a woman always outside a man's life and work, and never allowed to share his thoughts? As you look at me now I see something in your eyes I don't understand. Tell me about your professional worries."

"My profession is very specialised," said Albert, making a wry face: "Only a man, a poor over-worked man, would be interested in it."

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“ Nothing that interests you ever bores me. You need not tell me about all your cases, but I could understand a good many of them, I’m sure—I know I could help you sometimes. Women often have better judgment than men, more intuition, though they are supposed to be empty-headed. . . . ”

Hugot brought in tea, and solemnly put it on the table.

“ Women are limited to housekeeping, calls and dress—men and women live in separate worlds.”

“ Do you think my work amuses me ? ” said Albert ; “ do let me forget it and don’t spoil this good tea with memories of jurisprudence,” and, sipping his tea, he remarked : “ It’s not the same ; I’m sure it wasn’t bought at the Royal.”

“ Yes, it’s the same.”

“ The Quatrefages have delicious tea,” he said, spreading marmalade on a buttered biscuit. In a few moments he got up and moved instinctively towards his study.

“ Are you going to work ? ”

“ Yes, for a few minutes, before dinner.”

“ The Panthèse case ? ”

“ What do you know about the Panthèse case ? ”

“ I was there when you spent an hour explaining it to Marion. I wish you would tell me all about it.” She got up and shut the door.

“ How absurd you are ! It is a most complicated affair, and would take two hours to explain.”

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“ Do tell me about it just as you would one of your men friends.”

“ Well, I suppose I must.”

“ Mme. Panthèse was an orphan before her marriage. She had inherited a fortune of two hundred thousand francs from her parents, which she brought to her husband as a marriage portion. Panthèse invested this money in a small engraving business belonging to his brother in Russia. I forgot to say that Mme. Panthèse had no marriage settlement.”

“ I thought you told Marion he took his wife to Vienna ? ”

“ That’s a detail,” said Albert impatiently ;
“ oh, let’s leave it at that. I must go and work.”

“ The story is perfectly clear so far, I assure you.”

“ I don’t imagine you would have any difficulty in understanding the story of Mme. Panthèse’s furs, and all the rest of her troubles.”

“ Don’t bother about my understanding ; just go on,” said Bertha, leading Albert back to his chair.

So he continued, and Bertha listened attentively, nodding occasionally to show her interest.

He recollected in speaking that Marion had disagreed with him on the subject of the security. He knew that even if Bertha understood the meaning of the terms used, she would be unable to grasp their full import. It would be necessary to have heard Catois’ argument, the Verginol

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and Quesnel debate, and study the question as he himself had done, through a series of controversies and points at issue which had a bearing on the subject.

"We are making fools of ourselves," he interrupted.

"I understand it all perfectly."

"No, you don't. You can't possibly understand it. However, that's quite natural."

"I will repeat word for word what you have said."

"M. Panthèse invested his wife's two hundred thousand francs in the Paul Panthèse Company. This company went into liquidation before Mme. Panthèse sued for a divorce. M. Paul Panthèse therefore owed her two hundred thousand francs, and he gave her the goodwill of his business and his stock-in-trade as security."

"You repeat words that have no meaning for you."

"You are annoyed because you see how well I understand."

"No, you could not possibly understand, because you have not the requisite knowledge of securities, sales, and mortgages. It is quite natural. I only blame you for pretending to know all about it. I'll put before you the most important point of the whole affair, which you only regard as a matrimonial quarrel. Can one affirm that the security is legal?"

"Yes, it is legal."

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“Don’t imagine your affectation makes any impression whatever on me. Sometimes I really think you must be an utter fool.”

Then he stopped, his face twitching, and said furiously : “I can’t bear you to be a fool.”

He continued pacing up and down the room, and, as if addressing a witness, turned towards a chair, and cried passionately : “One forgives a friend’s stupidity, but not one’s wife’s. We wish our wives to share our ideas, and they burst their poor little brains. I knew a professor of constitutional law who sent his wife out of her mind, by cramming her with constitutional history. If one married a peasant woman one would expect nothing of her—one would not have to talk to her—one would be less lonely. The ignorance of women would be terrifying if one knew the extent of it, one does not dare to lift the veil. I will find some absurdly simple question to ask you—a question a child could answer. Tell me, when is there a moon and when isn’t there one ? ”

Albert came up to Bertha who moved nearer the window.

“Now, then, tell me why the moon is not always round ? ”

Bertha shrugged her shoulders and retreated behind the sofa. “I am quite serious. I am certain you know nothing whatever about it.”

He came closer, and Bertha turned away her head and cast down her eyes.

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“ I really want to find out what you think.”

Bertha stood still by the fireplace, forcing herself to listen to the ticking of the clock.

“ I will keep calm,” she said to herself, fixing her mind on clocks in general, to shut out the sound of Albert’s voice.

“ The Quatrefages have a clockmaker to wind up their clocks every fortnight. The Bonifases have not sold the clock in their drawing-room. They might have got a good price for it.”

“ I suppose you have observed there are some nights without a moon ? ”

“ I had no idea you were so fond of astronomy,” Bertha remarked gently, touching the cold marble of the chimneypiece, and saying to herself : “ I will be calm. I couldn’t have been so patient a year ago. I should have thrown this vase at him.” But her self-control suddenly gave way, and she cried :

“ You drive me mad—idiot ! ” and, throwing herself into a chair, she hid her face in her hands.

“ I don’t care a straw about your case,” she sobbed. “ I only spoke about it to please you.”

“ Forgive me,” said Albert, earnestly, folding her in his arms. “ I was too hasty ; I was only joking—you irritate me sometimes. Never mind—what I said doesn’t matter ; really, I don’t know what I did say.”

Stifled with sobs, she took breath to cry : “ I am not clever. I know that quite well.”

“ What does that matter ? ” said Albert,

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tenderly, taking her on his knee ; “ What on earth does it matter what you know—what you say—what we both say. . . .”

But despair again overwhelmed her, and like a frightened child who has been hurt, she cried : “ I know I am no earthly good ; all I have is my love for you.”

He held her closely in his arms, rocking her to and fro and stroking her hair, but she was inconsolable.

“ What I love in you is something quite different, something intangible,” he said, trying to define his feelings, but all he could say was :

“ I love you for yourself.”



Awaiting his client Aimé Cherix, with whom he had an appointment at two o'clock, Albert went into the library at the Law Courts, and took from his portfolio the notes which he invariably kept before him when pleading, but which he seldom had occasion to use.

As he folded them up he saw Maître Guillemot coming to speak to him.

“ A lady is asking for you,” said Guillemot in a low voice, wiping his forehead with a scented handkerchief.

“ A lady ? ”

“ Yes—and a very good-looking one—Mme. Castagné ; she is waiting for you in the vestibule.”

Odette was looking out of a window when

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Albert came up to her. Her habitual air of reserve was accentuated by the tragic expression of her face, and she held herself very erect.

“ Can I speak to you a moment ? ” she asked anxiously.

“ Yes, by all means. We can sit in the corridor,” Albert replied, opening the door for Odette.

“ This building is quite a little world in itself,” she remarked, changing to a pleasant, easy tone. “ I was in the boulevard Saint Michel and it suddenly occurred to me you might be at the Law Courts. I happened to meet Maître Guillemot, and he very kindly offered to bring me here. We have been looking for you all over the place. It is interesting to see all these men in their black gowns. How cool it is coming in from outside,” and she sat down on a bench close to Albert.

“ I have never seen you in this costume ; it is most becoming—I can never manage to find you in your flat.”

“ I am nearly always at home at five o’clock ; but I was late yesterday. I believe you came to see me ? ”

“ I wanted to consult you about my divorce.”

“ You have really decided to go in for one ? ”

“ I want to get some information first of all. I don’t understand how to go about it.”

CHAPTER XV

BROODING over her life with Albert, who was now deaf to her most ardent appeal, Bertha thought: "I am glad to know the truth—he doesn't love me; it is uncertainty that kills; I see now that he is incapable of an ideal intimacy, and I shan't trouble myself about him any more."

This resolution brought a sense of peace and relief; it was like a return to health after sickness, and, in her surprise at this refreshing change of mental outlook, Bertha said: "I haven't really cared for him for some time—that is evident."

All through the winter she went out a good deal, thinking only of her own amusement, and treating Albert in an extremely casual fashion. Some furniture, specially designed for her by M. Ransom, absorbed her completely. She furnished a room which faced the street, deciding to enlarge it by doing away with the linen-room, the contents of which she moved into a rarely used study of Albert's. First lacquer and then old china took her fancy, and for these objects she paid exorbitant prices. Albert was charmed to see her contented, and never grumbled at her purchases, saying to himself: "One may as well spend one's money while one is young."

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER his year of military service, André Chaurant resumed his studies in Paris, and was constantly advised by his mother, in her letters to him, to call on Albert and Bertha. André had not seen his old playmate for ten years. In imagination he pictured Bertha old and worldly, and feared to meet her lest his memories of Noizic should be spoilt.

Reserved and solitary at college, André avoided making new friends ; he began by attending lectures regularly, but soon gave up taking notes, arriving late and leaving before the end. Soon he found himself unable to remain at his desk at all, and spent all his time in the library, reading novels or newspapers.

The streets attracted him too ; not the boulevards, but the streets leading towards the suburbs, where he could evoke memories of the pretty girls at Rochefort. Crowded shops amused him enormously, with their feminine scents and chatter. He had the air of being always on the look-out for someone, and would dart towards some woman as though he recognised her ; if he encountered willingness he would turn away suddenly. In the suburbs he would follow an attractive girl, walking miles beside her without daring to speak. Exhausted, but indefatigable,

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he would tramp for hours trying to calm his nerves by bodily exertion. Sometimes, in front of a café, he would empty his glass as soon as he was served, and wander off in pursuit of some imaginary figure. The same thing happened in the evening, and he returned alone, as though nothing could satisfy him in this strange city. He slept heavily and stayed in bed late, dreaming of Noizic.

At length he no longer went out, and telling the concierge not to admit anyone, kept to his room for days at a time, dozing, smoking and reading poetry.

CHAPTER XVII

BERTHA rose quickly on hearing the bell ring, and went into her bedroom.

"It is M. André Chaurant," said Hugot in a low voice. "I have shown him into the drawing-room." Bertha glanced at her mirror and gave some finishing touches to her dress and hair.

"Good morning, André!" she cried vivaciously, opening the door, but she stopped abruptly, disconcerted by this young man with the unfamiliar moustache, so unsuited to the boyish, smiling features.

"Well, this is a surprise," said Bertha, giving him a penetrating look in which sadness mingled with pleasure. "It is such ages . . ."

For a moment they gazed at each other without speaking.

"I have changed a good deal haven't I?" she asked suddenly.

"You are a little thinner," André replied, without removing his eyes, and thinking that, although the bloom of youth had faded, there was a greater charm in this tired face.

Turning towards the table in a pre-occupied manner, Bertha removed a book to make room for the tea-tray.

"And you, André?" she asked. "Tell me

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about yourself ; I hear complaints of your idleness . . . you make your people anxious. . . . I am told you are looking for rooms. . . .”

“ Let’s talk about Noizic,” said André. “ I missed you at my sister’s wedding ; I should have enjoyed walking about here with you. I met Sambuc—think of it !—You remember Sambuc and his troupe of actors ? He is a gymnasium instructor now. I was delighted to be reminded of old times,” André continued. “ He thought himself a great swell ; he little knew what thoughts he created in my mind, and he talked like a silly idiot.”

“ Sambuc ! ” Bertha exclaimed. “ How far back that takes me ! You were determined to join him, or perhaps it was only that you wanted to get away ; I don’t know where, do you ? This idea of running away I thought wonderful ; besides, you always astonished me. I admired your high spirits, your imagination, your voice thrilled me when we acted in a play together. I felt sure you would become a famous man. . . . I didn’t know how . . . a great actor perhaps. . . . That’s it ! a great actor. How funny children are ! ” she added with a little laugh.

“ Yes—yes,” André rejoined gravely, “ I remember.”

“ You can tell me now. What did you really want to do ? ”

“ I don’t know. . . . ” He went on with sudden animation, his face reddening, “ Yes, I do know, but you can’t understand me. I was restless and

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bored—you haven't experienced that—a longing to begin again entirely, to be another person—somewhere else ; yes, to leave the place to which I had just come . . . to cast aside the half-read book . . . to run right away."

" I don't think I ought to scold you any more," said Bertha, in the serious tone she used to adopt when he was impressed by her knowledge of the world. " You believe in the wonderful surprises of destiny. You are waiting for something miraculous to happen, but life is more humdrum than that, and you will merely discover that you have lost several years."

She put a teacup on a table near the chair from which André had just got up. He sat down, but, oppressed by the heat of the room, stood up again directly, and continued volubly, his cheeks scarlet :

" You are sensible. . . . You always were. But you must keep wisdom for rainy days. Life is incalculable ; it disappoints those who look forward and speculate too much, but sometimes it rewards imprudent people, and sometimes stupid ones. We don't know who is winning and who is losing," and André drew nearer to Bertha, looking at her with a serious expression on his flushed face.

" You think I am lazy, but I am not. My thoughts are shaping themselves. I feel that my career is being secretly marked out in a sphere as yet inaccessible to me. You will be surprised. You pity me now ; you expected more of me ;

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you are thinking, ' Dear, dear ! This poor fellow is going to the bad.' . . . Well ! I tell you—Remember this day . . . this minute. It is five o'clock. You see this blue cushion ? It will remind us—remember that, looking at this blue cushion, I said : ' One day I shall surprise you.' ”

“ No, André, I am not disappointed ; I admire you tremendously,” Bertha replied, looking at him with a thoughtful expression and a slightly ironical smile, which made little wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. “ You are young, and youth is a wonderful thing. Stay and dine with us ; Albert will be so glad to see you.”

“ I would rather come another time.”

“ Then come again soon, and stay to dinner next time. We will talk about your rooms, which must be arranged just as you like them. . . . I will advise you ; I've got some good ideas. . . . I had no hand in choosing this furniture,” she added, seeing André stop in front of a Chinese cabinet.

♦ ♦ ♦

Talking all the time, the dealer turned an armchair over to show some peculiarity in its construction, recognising the fact that he was speaking to connoisseurs.

“ We will see,” said Bertha in a tentative manner, her glance, followed by that of the dealer, wandering to a wardrobe. She gave a last look at the armchair, and a lady with

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enormous earrings, who held herself very erect, responded discreetly to André's bow.

Bertha did not speak till they turned into the Rue du Bac.

"That armchair is not dear, but let's wait and go back to the shop later in the week."

"You might lose a good bargain."

"No fear. We shall find it again in the same place ; it has been there for two years."

"You didn't listen to the dealer. What a splendid liar—what a flow of language. The armchair is a good one and not dear ; but that's not enough for him—he was determined to fire our imaginations."

Jostled by the crowd, André stepped off the pavement and rejoining Bertha in front of a confectioner's window, he continued : "He wishes the furniture to attract us by its workmanship, its age, and other qualities of his own invention. He's a magnificent talker. What does truth matter to him ? His existence compels him to delude his clients."

They turned into a dark street ; the crowd on the pavement again separated André from Bertha, and they were compelled to postpone this discussion until they reached the Pacaris' house. There, in the drawing-room he had to raise his voice, while Bertha took off her hat in her bedroom ; drawing near the open door to reply to her, he could not help seeing the bed and her reflection in the long glass, though he did his best to look away.

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Just then Albert came in.

“ I recognised your voice,” said he, smiling.
“ You will dine with us ? Yes, he will,” he continued, addressing his wife.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was midnight, and several guests were grouped around the buffet. Albert was looking at his watch when Périer came towards him.

"Weren't you at the Roinarts' the night before last?" said Périer; "I thought I saw you, just as you were leaving."

Albert looked dejected and weary as he turned to reply. Almost every day of his life ended in this tedious manner, amidst the chatter of stupid voices; and on each occasion he said to himself: "This is no way to live."

Leaning against a cabinet, he glanced towards the dining-room; near the buffet, and surrounded by a group of men, he caught sight of Bertha in a black gown sparkling with sequins, her beautiful white shoulders outlined by dark fur. He went to the buffet and helped himself to a glass of champagne, passing close to his wife and gazing at her arm, which was bare except for rows of jet beads falling from the shoulder. He whispered to her:

"It is getting late; let us go."

"Wait a minute," said Bertha, without looking at him, still animated and absorbed by the conversation around her. "You know M. Moussons?"

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Albert shook hands with Moussons, and drew back a step behind Bertha to put down his glass ; then, feeling as though she no longer belonged to him, he timidly left her ; her radiant health, joyousness and new taste for pleasure seemed to place a gulf between them.

It was later than usual when Bertha and Albert got into the motor ; Albert welcomed the cold night air as a foretaste of peace and quietness.

“ What a bad dinner,” he grumbled. Bertha made no reply, and he continued : “ That girl plays well. Strange how music gives an ecstatic expression to fools who haven’t an ounce of brains—it makes them look as though they had something in their heads after all.”

“ Why do you make out that everyone you meet is a fool ? You don’t know anything about them.”

“ I have only to mention our fellow guests of the last five hours—Count Belissen. You don’t stand up for him, I imagine Moussons . . . ? ”

“ Moussons has a different sort of brain from yours,” said Bertha eagerly. “ But he is a cultured man, and a good musician ; he is coming to see me to-morrow.”

“ Moussons is coming to our house ? ”

“ Is it so extraordinary ? ”

“ What I find extraordinary is that it should give you any pleasure to meet these commonplace people. I can understand your liking for Moussons, because he is a first-rate musician, but the Chaffners, Sorbet, and the Moinvilles ! ”

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Bertha was silent ; she felt it was useless to continue the discussion.

“ Have you got the fare ready ? ” she asked when the taxi stopped. Gathering up the train of her gown and holding in one hand her crimson velvet cloak, she stepped lightly on to the pavement.

“ Seriously now,” said Albert, lowering his voice when he had joined her in the lift, “ are you going to Chantilly on Sunday ? ”

“ The Moinvilles have offered to take me, and I have accepted. I managed to get an invitation for André ; he wants to see the race-course.”

To Bertha's way of thinking, these plausible reasons, which she gave so simply, sufficed to explain completely the most ordinary of expeditions.

She was not aware that Albert's question meant, “ Is this extraordinary woman really you ? ”

Then, as if fearing to question her further, he merely added, “ I shall not go.”



Bertha seemed always to choose the luncheon hour to telephone to Moussons. Albert went into the drawing-room, sat down by a table, got up again and crossed the hall, listening impatiently to Bertha's voice at the telephone—to this interminable talk of which the sense escaped him, punctuated by silences and sudden

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bursts of laughter. When she came into the dining-room Albert tried to keep calm, but in an unnaturally quiet voice and bitter tone, he talked against Moussons, and even questioned his musical talent. Bertha smiled quietly at his unjust estimate without attempting to reply.

"He hasn't even the excuse of jealousy," she thought. "Poor Moussons is the most harmless person in the world. What exasperates Albert is that I can possibly admire any brain but his own."

In every word he spoke she thought she detected the tyranny of a husband who wishes his wife to live only for him, compelling her to adopt his tastes, and hiding her from the world. She attributed his longing for a quiet life to the weariness of a middle-aged man who has known the pleasures of singleness. Nothing like this had ever been her lot.

In the evening, when they went out together, Albert's bored expression annoyed her unspeakably, and a feeling of revolt, a secret demand for independence, mingled with her recent eagerness for society. Bertha did not ask herself whether she really enjoyed going out or not, but never found excuses for declining invitations; this easy intercourse in an atmosphere of smiling welcome delighted her.

Moreover, this society vaguely censured by Albert afforded her every sort of opportunity for amusement. Interesting men of all professions, widely different points of view, an

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easier and fuller life in every way, made her forget the constraint imposed upon her by the domination of a narrow-minded man, and enabled her to develop her own individuality.

♦ ♦ ♦

“ The Saint-Abres are going to send you an invitation,” said Bertha one day, when André came to see her. “ You know that Mme. de Saint-Abre is Lartigue’s sister ? I have met Lartigue several times ; he wants to paint my portrait, and I have been to his studio. I’ll take you there one day. I’m sure you will like him.”

Thinking André required amusements, Bertha took him with her to parties, and even thought of finding him a wife. There was Thérèse de Saint-Abre or Marie Arnous. André appeared to be interested by the description of the girls in question, and willingly consented to meet them ; but as he talked to them his thoughts were of Bertha.

“ I assure you she is charming,” said Bertha one afternoon, on leaving the lecture-room, to which she had taken André so that he could see Mdlle. Hugon. “ A large hat is more becoming ; she looked exquisite at the Fontanès’ party.”

“ Wouldn’t you like to go to the Ritz ? ” said André.

“ We shall be all right here,” replied Bertha, going into a tea-shop. They sat down at a small table and talked in low voices.

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“ If you don’t marry young you never will marry,” said Bertha.

“ Why do you want me to marry ? ”

“ Because you ought to marry. What will become of you ? A good-looking bachelor, who is bound to have love affairs, generally ends by making a stupid marriage. Do love affairs amuse you ? ”

“ I’ve never had one.”

“ You don’t expect me to believe that you’re like the man in the Swiss song who had a heart of stone. Do you admire that sort ? ” she continued as she noticed a pair of eyes devouring him.

“ She has lovely eyes.”

“ Lovely eyes, and that’s all. I see, I must keep a close watch, you bad boy ! ” and she tapped André with her big muff.

“ We are forgetting to order tea,” he reminded her, and beckoned to an attendant.

“ Do you still skate ? ”

“ No,” said Bertha.

She leant back in her basket chair, suddenly silent, listless and tired, and took off her gloves.



“ It’s too bad ; you go out every day and never rest,” said Albert one evening, when his wife was getting ready to go to the Gravières. In the midst of dressing, she suddenly drew off the silk stockings she had just put on and went to bed. The least thing tired her these days,

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especially towards evening ; she rose late, lay down in the afternoon, and scolded herself for her inaction. She was easily irritated, discontented, discouraged ; and, though having no desire to go out, regretted the loss of those high spirits which had hitherto enabled her to enjoy herself wherever she went. She felt changed, older. Once the idea that some visitor would come and observe her sadness worried her for a whole day. She now saw no one except André. Once, when they were talking together in the drawing-room, she got up from her chair to hide her tears. She felt that people were hateful and solitude desirable ; in the world she found nothing but flattery, lies and spitefulness. " Albert has disheartened me," she said to herself, " with his endless complaints. He cannot bear me to be interested in other people, and he disapproves as much of my enjoyment now as he did of my too continual absorption in him in the old days."



Bertha would remain for hours lying sulkily in the same place, with an obstinate expression that Albert recognised at a glance on coming into the drawing-room.

Recalling past words and gestures of her husband's which had irritated her, the mere recollection of which exasperated her, she reflected bitterly, " He never loved me ; that accounts for everything."

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One day, when Albert came into the room she avoided the lamplight as though she disliked being looked at ; and she replied with difficulty to his kind low-voiced inquiries. Then, suddenly he lost patience : “ You are ill, that’s clear ! It’s all the result of this absurd life you lead.” He raised the lamp-shade so that the light streamed full on his wife’s face for a moment ; then he returned to his study and tried to work, but, lonely and wretched, he found he could do nothing.

One afternoon Albert left his study to take Bertha a book, and heard a strange voice in her bedroom. It was Mme. Moineville, who had insisted on seeing her in spite of Hugot’s opposition.

“ I have been telling your wife she must see a doctor. Why not consult Fleuret ? He’s my sister’s doctor, and is simply marvellous, charming and so clever. When you treat this sort of thing lightly . . . Look at Thérèse . . . it was too late ! Do send for Fleuret, and tell him I recommended him.”

Looking at Bertha, who was decidedly cheered by this visit, Albert suddenly came to the conclusion that she undoubtedly ought to see a doctor as soon as possible, and could not imagine why the idea had not entered his head before.

“ Dear child ! ” said Mme. Moineville, kissing Bertha, “ you know how fond I am of you. I’m sure it’s nothing serious. Listen,” she went

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on, arranging her veil in front of the looking-glass, "I'll telephone this evening to Fleuret, and say you are going to write to him."

"You are quite right and thanks so much! It's most kind of you," said Albert, following Mme. Moineville across the drawing-room.

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"Above all, I advise rest in the country," said the doctor, writing without raising his eyes.

"For several months?" said Bertha.

"For several months."

Albert, who had stood at the end of the room, staring at the bookcases, now came forward, fingering the gold pieces which he had ready in his waistcoat pocket, and said to Bertha, in a low tone: "You might go to Noizic."

"Not at once," she said.

"Is it absolutely necessary for my wife to go immediately?" Albert asked the doctor.

"No, but she must not wait too long."

"You don't insist on a high altitude or a special climate?"

"No, anywhere in the country."

CHAPTER XIX

SO Bertha went to Noizic to stay with Emma. The moment she arrived she unpacked her trunks in order to distribute presents to the children, whose high spirits made the house a delightful place. Here, living the past over again, in these old rooms, recovering her spirits, returning as it were to happy childhood, she would run to her mother, saying : “ Fancy my being here ! How nice it is to be together again ! ”

Mme. Dégouy was, of course, glad to see her daughter, but Bertha found her greatly changed ; vagueness and indifference had never been part of her temperament. Bertha stayed at home for the first few days, hardly looking at the surrounding country which so vividly recalled her youth, and she spent much time in the garden trying to find the exact spots where she had played as a child. Everywhere she was reminded of the strong, confident girl who had wandered along these paths full of hope for the future, and with a man’s face fixed in her mind.



One evening, after dinner, Bertha sat in the garden ; through a window and across the dark drawing-room she could see Mme. Dégouy’s

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profile outlined near the lamp. Suddenly a man appeared out of the darkness.

"You!" she cried, recognising André.

"You didn't expect me so soon. Well, here I am. This morning I passed Montparnasse station. It was fearfully hot. You know that hazy heat in the grey streets. . . . I said to myself: 'At Noizic the skies are clear; the sun shines, the trees are green, and Bertha is in her garden. Yes, if I go by the ten-twenty I shall see her this very day!'"

"But how about your exam.? What will your parents say? "

"We will see about that. I have come to you straight from the station."

"You bad boy!" and she smiled a mild reproach.

"What a marvellous thing the railway is," André remarked as he sat down. "This morning I was in Paris, and now I am here with you. I used to think the progress of science would spoil everything; but now I see it brings us all sorts of surprises and pleasures."

"And your exam.?"

"I would have passed; I worked hard enough, but somehow I couldn't face it—I don't know—I've often done things like that at the last moment. Anyhow, I have had enough of Paris."

"I hope you will go straight back again tomorrow morning!"

"No, I want to look after you. Mother wrote

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that Essener is here ; he is a dangerous man, and you are all alone."

" You think I am in danger ? " she asked, laughing.

She leant back on the seat and glanced at André, hardly visible in the darkness.

" You know I'm a sensible woman."

" I am not so sure."

" How silly you are ! Don't you want to see Emma ? " she said, touching his arm.

" No, it's dinner-time. I'll come back again to-morrow. Don't say you have seen me. Good-bye," and he stepped silently across the lawn.



Bertha slept soundly. She opened her eyes and cried " Come in " to someone who had already knocked twice at her door, and then turned over to go to sleep again ; she was trying to recall a pleasant dream. She was a girl . . . and Soubirant was holding her hand in the Fondebaud garden while she smilingly returned his tender glances. She saw Albert there, but that made no impression upon her. This recollection was still fresh on rising. Sitting for a moment on the edge of the bed, her whole being was suffused with an atmosphere of youthful love.

After lunch, being without sufficient energy to write to Mme. Soubirant as she had intended, she sat quite still, resting her elbow on the little writing-table. She looked out of the

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window, and thought of old Mother Chollet, who had just lost her youngest son. Presently she jumped up and put on her hat. She took the road which led to the river. The sunlight, which had been obscured by a passing cloud, suddenly fell upon a distant church steeple. In childhood Bertha had loved this somewhat barren landscape, which, when the sun shone, reminded her of the sea. The river bank was a favourite evening haunt, where, in solitude, she had been free to admire the distant view, to dream of an imaginary lover and future happiness.

To-day she saw nothing. With downcast eyes she walked along the river bank, following a child on its way to school.

"Has old Mother Chollet left this house?" she inquired of a fisherman, and pointed to a hovel with closed shutters.

"She comes home at night," said the man. "She works in the fields."

"Is she far away?"

"Close to Breteau Wood. About three miles off."

Bertha retraced her steps to Noizic, thinking:

"Poor woman, she still has to work; life is hard for some people."

When she came in, René was doing his lessons with his mother in the dining-room.

Absolutely indifferent to her own health since her husband's death, seven months before, Emma was wearing herself out for the sake of her children. Bertha stopped near the table,

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without sitting down, and glanced at an exercise book. These childish heads in the lamplight, their voices, the atmosphere of this home which was not hers, made her long to go away. She missed Paris, not her own house there, but the crowded, glittering streets that distracted her from gloomy thoughts.

CHAPTER XX

THAT evening after dinner Bertha had her lounge chair carried to the middle of the lawn, where her mother joined her, followed by Emma.

“What a lovely evening!” said Mme. Dégouy, wrapping herself in her shawl.

“Yes,” agreed Emma, raising her eyes to the clear sky.

Silence fell upon them; the moonlight had the effect of making the trees and shrubs appear shrunken and of enlarging the garden; the shapes of the firs were still defined, but trees with smaller branches, the tamarisks and the poplars, were blurred like smoke.

Overcome by an indefinable sorrow, which the intense stillness increased, Bertha held one hand over her face and from time to time wiped away a tear.

“Here is André,” exclaimed Mme. Dégouy, cordially shaking the young man’s hand. “You came upon us like a ghost.”

“How do you do, Emma,” said André.

“You have no chair,” said Mme. Dégouy, getting up.

“I don’t want one, thank you,” he replied, sitting down on the grass.

“What a delightful evening!” Mme. Dégouy exclaimed. “There is not a breath of wind.”

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A tray of glasses reflected the moonlight.

"Is this your famous recipe, madame?" the young man asked, taking the glass which Mme. Dégouy gave him and handing it to Emma.

"Very little syrup for me," said Bertha, seeing André taking up the bottle.

"I know your taste," he answered, "that's right, isn't it? But wait a moment; let me raise the back of your seat; you will be more comfortable."

Remembering her late husband's disapproval of André's manner towards women, this attention to Bertha annoyed Emma, and she said:

"Will you excuse me? I am going indoors."

Bertha put her lips to the glass that André gave her. The contact with its cold rim brought a sudden tightness at her throat and tears to her eyes.

"It is very sweet," she said slowly, with a trembling voice, screening her eyes as though to avoid a bright light.

"My dear children, I must go in," said Mme. Dégouy.

"I shall stay out a little longer," Bertha remarked without turning her head.

André accompanied Mme. Dégouy to the house; he left her at the door and watched her into the drawing-room, where she sat down near the lamp, picked up a newspaper and put on her spectacles. Before long she was gently nodding her head in a peaceful doze. André returned quickly to Bertha.

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“ Bertha ! ” . . . he cried, bringing his chair close up to hers . . . “ Speak to me. You can’t hide your tears from me this evening ; I have known for a long time that you were unhappy. I was certain of it the first time I saw you, though you do your best to hide your troubles.”

André’s face was close to her own, and yet, in the moonlight, it seemed far off.

“ I am more lonely than you can imagine,” she murmured, trying to smile. She would have gone on talking, but her voice became inarticulate. How could she explain ? Tears ran down her cheeks, and she did not now try to hide them.

“ I know,” said André, taking her hand. “ I was sure you were unhappy. But I did not dare to speak. How can one say to a woman : ‘ Confide in me,’ when she might reply : ‘ I am quite happy ’ ? Everyone takes for granted that a married woman is happy, and that her husband is everything to her. It is not altogether unheard of ; it happens occasionally by a miracle. Women say nothing. . . . They hide their griefs proudly. In whom can they confide ? Only one person has the right to question them.”

Bertha looked towards the house, and got up ; they wandered down a little white path, where deep black shadows were dappled by moonlight. Then came the gloom of the fir trees, and they groped for a rustic seat which stood near an iron table.

André took Bertha’s hand again.

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“ I think you are a dear ! ” she murmured, gently pressing his fingers.

“ We must go in,” she said gently.

“ Not yet. . . . ”

She rose, and he tried to detain her, saying :

“ You cannot imagine how much I love you ! ”

Agitated and somewhat alarmed, Bertha drew her hand away, and in a tone of mild reproach :

“ André ! ”

He perceived that she interpreted these words as a declaration of love ; he had not thought seriously of this at first, but now that he had spoken he felt certain of his feelings, and cried in exaltation :

“ Didn’t you know ? Don’t you remember ? One day, going up to my rooms, you wore a black silk dress, with a white frilled collar.”

Bertha thought as she listened, “ How childish ! ” and would have liked to tell him that he was only a boy, without hurting his feelings, but he gazed at her so passionately that she felt frightened and could only murmur : “ André ! ”

They were silent, leaning close to each other. “ We really must go in now,” said Bertha at last, in as natural a tone as she could command.

“ Stay a little longer, I implore you.”

In a faint voice, as if exhausted by an inward struggle, she murmured :

“ No . . . we must go in. Come back to-morrow.”

They returned to the house, gleaming white in the cold moonlight. “ Are you going, André ? ”

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asked Mme. Dégouy, hastily picking up the fallen newspaper.

Leaving André with her mother, Bertha went up to her room. She threw open the window and looked out at the garden ; then she flung herself on her bed, listening while Mme. Dégouy walked along the passage ; over and over again André's voice said : " You cannot imagine how much I love you ! " His eyes had been full of passionate longing. She remembered only these words, retained but one picture, and, absorbed in that moment, her mind was benumbed by the constantly recurring vision. Someone shut a window facing the road, and Bertha got up and began to undress ; but she still seemed to hear : " You cannot imagine how much I love you ! " and as she brushed her hair, André's eyes were fixed on her, ardently, passionately.

She sat down by the open window ; outside, in the moonlight, among the motionless leaves, there were little rustling sounds and an occasional flutter of tiny wings. Then suddenly the stillness was broken by the raucous crowing of a cock, a mistaken signal long before the dawn.



Lying in bed the next morning, Bertha experienced some uneasiness in reviewing the events of the previous evening. She regretted her lamentable weakness, and was troubled by

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the thought of seeing André again. She could meet him as usual, and show by her manner that she wished to ignore their interview, but she could never take back the secret which had escaped her in an unguarded moment. "How little it takes to make a woman lay bare the inmost secrets of her heart," she reflected; but recalling the previous evening's events, she consoled herself with the reflection that André had made all the advances. Had she said a single word she regretted, either in the avenue or under the pine trees, or when in her lounge chair? Not one—she had merely been kind to him; certainly he had noticed her tears, but they could be accounted for on other grounds. He was the one who had declared his love.

Somewhat calmed by these reflections, Bertha repeated to herself: "You cannot imagine how much I love you," and in her mind there was always the sound of his voice, and the strange expression in his eyes.



Thinking the water would get cold, Bertha jumped out of bed, took off her nightdress, gathered up her hair to the top of her head, and, with a glance at the mirror, went into her dressing-room. She put on her dressing gown, and, seating herself before the looking-glass, combed her thick hair. She was no longer thinking of her troubles, and, picking up a novel near a box of letter-paper, she remembered she had not

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written to her husband. "I can write another day," she said, opening the book and cutting its last pages. From the window, she saw Emma sitting under the chestnut tree.

"The poor thing is always thinking of her troubles," Bertha reflected. "Why should one prolong sorrow like that? People feel guilty if they forget; it's so stupid; they make a mistake in shunning pleasures and diversions which would help them to get over their sorrows."

Returning to her looking-glass to brush her hair, she leaned her elbow on the dressing-table, staring in front of her with unseeing eyes. André's face and the sound of his voice filled her mind.

"He's only a child," she assured herself, and went again to the window to gaze at the blue sky and the trees. The fine morning exhilarated her. Humming a tune, she opened a drawer and chose a pair of fine white cotton stockings, then slowly finished dressing, paying minute attention to the smallest details of her toilet.

On leaving the house, she had a presentiment that André would come that morning about eleven o'clock, and, crossing the terrace to join Emma, came upon a troop of children shouting *The White Cat*, and little Marie hid her face in Bertha's skirt, dodged behind her and fled into the house, pursued by René.

"It is so fine, I am letting them play this morning," said Emma, when Bertha sat down

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beside her. "They will do their lessons this afternoon. Look ! There's André !"

"I have just been to see Touchet," said André. "I heard your children from the road, and thought, as I was passing, I would come and say 'Good morning.' I can't stay." He sat down near Emma, as if fearing to look at Bertha. Little Jean brought him his stuffed duck, a favourite plaything, which André held awkwardly, smiling at the child and saying :

"You don't play with your train now ?"

Bertha looked at André now and then, as he bent over the child ; the slow movements, the stifled voice, the dreamy and confused manner were eloquent ; he seemed to be thinking only of her.

"Aren't you going to Fondebaud this week ?" he asked, looking at her for the first time.

"I owe them an apology, and I'm going there the day after to-morrow."

"Shall I drive you ?"

"Thank you—I think not. I would rather walk, that is, if it's fine."

A chestnut fell to the ground with a thud, as though someone had thrown a stone through the branches.

"It is hardly safe here," said André ; then, perceiving that Emma was not going to leave them alone, he rose to go.

"Are you going back to Paris soon ?"

"About the middle of October," replied Bertha.

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When André had gone a few yards, Bertha called him back, and went towards the gate with him, murmuring in a low voice :

“ Don’t come back here ; it isn’t safe—we can meet at Fondebaud.”

“ There are too many people at Fondebaud ; I want to speak to you alone,” he said, breathlessly.

“ The day after to-morrow,” she smiled.

“ Bertha,” he said softly, with burning eyes ; then, seeing that Emma was about to leave her seat, said no more, but opened the gate and pressed Bertha’s hand quickly.



“ Poor André ! I must try to cure him,” Bertha said to herself when she remembered this parting and André’s words to her : ‘ I have known for some time past that you were unhappy.’

“ What sensitive refinement in his voice ! ” she mused. “ With the marvellous intuition of youth and love he understands me better than the man who lives with me. What sympathy ! He would never have found me troublesome and exacting. All my wasted affection should have been showered on him. I am free to accept his devotion. The man to whom I gave my love has no use for it ; he only captured me in order to torment me. He has changed and humiliated me ; he hardly ever sees me. Do I really belong to him ? He can reclaim his wife—a poor suffering creature. But I am no longer like that. My

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heart is as free as it was when I first surrendered myself to the man I believed in."

She remembered the delightful days in Paris with André. She had teased and contradicted him, but they had really agreed on every subject, and his admiration for her was unbounded. How gaily she had chattered to him ! Albert would hardly have recognised her. But it was her true nature which had reasserted itself ; her love of life, her wit, her charm, all that she thought had been crushed out of her by his constant indifference.

She recalled André's way of looking at her, and now understood the meaning of many of the things he had said. His love, disguised as friendship, had spread over the whole of her past life, and it now crept into her heart ; she suddenly asked herself :

" Am I in love with him ? No, love doesn't come like this ; it unhinges one's whole existence ; it can never be mistaken."

As happy in these familiar country surroundings as in her childhood days, she went in and out as usual, from house to garden, talking to Emma ; everything seemed brighter.

" Do I love him . . . ? " she pondered, and then, to persuade herself to the contrary, she pictured André with his red cheeks and snub nose, assuring herself she had always thought him plain. But she failed to efface his image from her thoughts.

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High up on the hill-side, where the Fondebaud vineyards begin, André stopped and rested his bicycle against a stone-heap. He wiped his dusty shoes in the grass, took off his waistcoat and opened his coat, baring his chest to the wind. To make time pass more quickly he had stayed in bed till luncheon, but at last the moment so anxiously anticipated for two days had come. He knew that this was not merely impatience and sensual attraction, such as he had so often felt for women of a very different type ; his whole soul was filled with admiration for her. That she was married, and a woman of culture and refinement, made this life-transforming event even more mysterious.

Taking a small mirror from his pocket, he saw Bertha's distant sunshade reflected in it, and, agitated and nervous at the thought of meeting her alone, he remounted his bicycle and went into Fondebaud Park, where tennis was being played, and children were chasing each other on the grass. Under a tree, in front of the chateau, Andouard, Marguerite Ducroquet's fiancé, was reading *l'Arlésienne* aloud to a group of ladies.

"Don't let me interrupt you," said André, smiling, as he shook hands with Mme. Ducroquet and seated himself by the side of Marie-Louise.

Andouard shut the book.

"It is finished," he said.

"How beautiful it is," sighed Marguerite, turning to her fiancé, with tears in her eyes.

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Suddenly catching sight of Bertha's sun-shade through the oak trees, André started from his seat, but checked himself, and walked slowly towards the children.

"Where are you going?" he asked them.

"We are going to see the vintage wagon; it's coming along the road."

"Oh! has the vintage begun?" he asked with pretended interest, without ceasing to watch Bertha's slow approach. The children surrounded her in a moment

"How are you, André?" disengaging the hand which little Annie was covering with kisses. The young man's first words, the expression on his face, made her aware of the definite understanding that existed between them.

"I've been utterly wretched waiting for you. I shall never be able to speak to you here. You are naughty, really!"

At this moment Marie-Louise ran up to Bertha, and André moved away to watch the tennis, exclaiming: "Oh! a men's set; that's a serious matter."

Exasperated at not seeing Bertha alone, he walked off with a determined air, then returned immediately as though drawn back to her by an invisible wire.

Without speaking or even appearing to listen to him, Bertha answered with a beaming smile which included everybody.

"You look fifteen in that hat!" said Mme. Ducroquet just as tea was brought. "You actually

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walked here ? You did not find it too hot ? These men won't be torn away from their tennis, so let's have tea ! ”

“ You are getting on well with the vintage, madame,” said Bertha vivaciously to Mme. Ducroquet. “ The Pujols also began in good time.” She noticed André's preoccupation and knew its cause.

“ How is your governess ? ” she asked Marie-Louise with an enchanting smile.

The idea she wished to convey was : “ None of you understands ; you couldn't possibly ; you would all be shocked. It's my affair, and I know what I'm doing.”

Wiping his heated face and neck with a handkerchief, Raoul joined them ; his sweater was slung across his shoulders.

“ I'll have a glass of port,” he said, sitting down and lighting a cigarette. He held the burning match to little Blanche, who tried to blow it out.

“ A last set ? ” he suggested.

“ I don't want to play again,” said Godet. “ Three sets are enough for me. Don't you play, Mme. Pacaris ? ”

“ I have not played for ten years.”

“ You used to play very well,” said Raoul. “ Come and make up a set with us. Come on, Laurent ; and André, you play with Bertha.”

“ You'll see, we shall beat them,” said André, who ran to find Marie-Louise's racquet.

Bertha took off her hat, pinned up her skirt, and put on her tennis shoes.

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"It is my service," she cried. "Let it go . . . ! I've got it . . . !" and Raoul ran behind the back line.

Her old skill came back, and she darted over the court with youthful agility, playing at random, but missing nothing. She encroached on André's play, returning many difficult balls, and the excitement restored all the impetuosity of her youthful days.

When he went up to Bertha to give her a ball, André spoke to her without lowering his voice, but fortunately his words were drowned in exclamations from their opponents as he bounded to another part of the court. Careering all over the ground, overheated and intent upon the game, he made known his love by quick, disjointed phrases, which he evidently thought no one would hear. She took the balls from him quickly without replying, and served with sudden violence. Bertha watched his extraordinary gyrations, thinking: "He is too much of a child to understand the seriousness of what he says. He thinks me as young as himself. He doesn't dream I am guilty. And, am I, after all? What should I be doing? I once believed in sacred words, which amounted to nothing. I was under the impression that one could give oneself to a man, and exist only as part of him. But we remained two separate beings. . . . Well, I am what I am. . . ."

Mme. Ducroquet walked up to the tennis court.

"Are you winning?" she asked.

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"Bertha is wonderful," cried André, making a difficult play with the end of his racquet. "We have won five points running."

The two men, who had been playing more or less carelessly, became more attentive to the game, and André and Bertha began to weaken.

"It's too bad!" cried Bertha, throwing down her racquet, and collapsing on the bench.

"We only needed one more game!"

"It's my fault. . . . I was fagged out."

"It's too bad," cried André, seating himself beside Bertha, passing his arm round the back of the bench, and seizing her hand. She rose abruptly, glanced at Mme. Ducroquet, and still felt the quick insistent pressure of his fingers.

"Do you want your revenge?" asked Raoul.

"No," replied Bertha, "another time."

She walked thoughtfully towards the chateau, and Marie-Louise joined her in the hall; as she talked to her, Bertha kept thinking, "I must speak seriously, and tell him that we are friends, that I shall always have a great affection for him, but nothing more."

Standing near the fishpond, André looked at the water-lilies, and Bertha came towards him. "I want to see you to-morrow," she said rapidly. "Mother is going out to lunch; I shall be alone. Don't come to the house. Walk along the Saint Hilaire Road: I will be there at two o'clock."

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Mme. Dégouy and Emma went for a drive

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in the Calvets' carriage, while Bertha remained behind with the children. After luncheon she saw the little girls off to school, and, after reading a letter from Albert which had just come, she took her sewing into the garden in order to compose herself. She thought incessantly of André's arrival, but her mental vision was half-effaced by her languid mood. However, she felt it gaining possession of her ; it was like a throbbing pulse ; she became impatient, and tried to put it out of her mind by changing her seat, and calling Céline. The hour drew near ; it was a predestined event which she had to face. Not knowing what she would say to him, even whether she would be able to find any words at all, she looked again at her watch, went into the billiard-room, arranged her hat before the mirror, listened a moment by the staircase, then noiselessly opened the hall door and went out on to the road.

André was there.

" Let's go to Grave," he said, and without giving her time to reply, went on : " Bertha ! Do forgive me. . . . You intoxicate me. . . . Don't be sorry for anything."

To overpower and confuse her, he spoke rapidly. He would have preferred a leisurely, aimless walk, but he was bent upon success, and wished to prevent Bertha from speaking and to avoid silences. He spoke uninterruptedly, expressing, not his real thoughts, but anything that might benumb, move or flatter her.

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"You'll see; it's just the place," and he bent back the branches for Bertha to pass. "I came here this morning. . . . I've got it all ready for you."

Bertha sat down on a huge moss-covered stump of a tree while he stretched himself at her feet, kissed her hand fervently, and then became silent. After a long pause, he said :

"This little hand gives nothing to others. It's only a little hand . . . but for me it opens a whole world of delight," and he gazed at Bertha's fingers; they were still like those of the girl he had known years ago. He got up as though unable to endure his longing for her, gazed fixedly into her eyes, stroked her arm, and then drew away his hand. He sat by her side, with his arm round her and his head upon her shoulder as though asleep. Speechless and immovable, Bertha found herself, to her astonishment, experiencing sensations she had supposed were no longer possible for her. The revelation was terrible and she was filled with shame. Recognising that she was in the clutches of a force against which nothing has any power, she did not repulse André, nor attempt to defend herself. She realised that it was not André's but her own weakness that was threatening, and she languidly gave up the struggle. For a moment she thought : "What will become of me ? Oh, it had to happen ; I am a lost woman, and I don't much care."

She threw back her head, weakly intending

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to escape André's embrace, and he kissed her neck, sought her upturned face, and saw her lips ready for his approaching kiss. She waited, vanquished and happy, but his timidity held him back. He wanted his kiss to be willingly accepted.

"Bertha, why are you so serious?" he murmured.

"You frighten me." Her voice was faint, her eyes cast down. Then she added: "To think that it is you . . . that it is I . . ." and went on, trying to excuse the situation. "You took advantage of me in the name of friendship . . . a man like you. . . ."

He only understood what there was of flattery in her words, and replied "I admire you so much."

"It is all very strange," Bertha continued. "A moment is enough . . . a little daring . . . and one becomes another person . . . even I, the calmest, the proudest. . . . As for men, it takes very little to upset them. When one looks at a man for a moment, even by way of amusement, he thinks about one for two or three days. Poor human nature. . . . I used to scorn its weaknesses, I thought myself so strong. I ought to have been more charitable. . . . It is too true: how much there is in a tender glance! One falls a victim at the first touch of hands; we are all easily conquered. The trouble comes later."

"Always wise," said André, smiling—"Always sensible."

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"No, dear André," said Bertha, taking his hand, "you see for yourself that I am far from wise."

"You have no faith in me," rejoined André. "You think it a mere caprice. It is impossible for you to know how completely my life is changed—how continually you are in my thoughts. You will see when we go back to Paris."

"There! Already you say, 'When we are in Paris,' already you want novelty, and that sort of thing does not last. You think you are in love with a friend—we were such good chums in Paris—but isn't it a stranger who has attracted you—an unknown woman who trembled at your words, and whom you did not expect to find in me? This woman will disappear as rapidly as your astonishment, the more you see of me. I also think of the future." She pronounced these words lightly, as though she did not wish to believe them.

"No, it is you I love . . . you yourself . . ." rejoined André, gently touching her wrist under her sleeve.

She leant against the tree and said slowly: "I tell you that, because I am certain of it"; then in a burst of tenderness and sincerity: "You see, I loved a man, André, yes, I loved him. . . ."

André tried to put his arm round Bertha's shoulder and appeared not to hear; observing this with a little pang, she kept silence.

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"Is your husband coming back this week?"

"He returns on Sunday evening."

"Sunday. . . . I love this necklace," he said, touching Bertha's throat, and seeking a phrase, a caress, which would draw them together again; but an undercurrent of thought had already begun to flow between them.

"You had better go," said Bertha. "We can't go back together."

"You want me to go already? You're not the same person, Bertha," he said, taking her hand. "Look at me."

"No, dear André," she replied, rising; "I haven't changed, but I must think about going home. Mother and Emma are coming back to tea."

"Not yet. . . . I beg of you!"

"We really must go now; I shall be at Mme. Grassin's at three o'clock to-morrow; I shall pass your house coming back, and you can join me."

"But the road is so unsatisfactory, Bertha; let me kiss you."

"We must go. Please be good; we shall see each other to-morrow."

Still standing in front of her and smiling, he spoke in a low but determined voice:

"I want to kiss you, now!"

"We must go," she said, repulsing him gently.

He seized Bertha's arm, drew her roughly towards him and kissed her rapidly, almost mechanically.

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" Oh, do let's go ! " she cried, without looking at him, and then sat down as though tired out, thinking : " So that was what he wanted ! "

She plucked the little bits of moss from the hem of her skirt ; then she looked up and saw a cart passing down the road. André was walking behind it.

" What is he, after all ? " she wondered, and remembered with disgust his thin hands, red face and greedy eyes. " Was there anything in him but this vulgar physical desire ? "

Mme. Dégouy had not returned when Bertha entered the house, so she rang for Céline, and ordered tea to be brought in ; she took off her hat without going upstairs, and sat wearily at the tea-table.

Going presently to the window, she drew back the curtains and saw a wagon passing slowly along the road, drawn by a team of horses with their heads moving from side to side.

" What has happened to me to-day ? I felt lost, but there was no reason to. I allowed him to kiss me ; I wanted him to. He could have done what he liked with me. I saw what might happen, and rather wanted to experience it. Then I talked to him. What did I say ? . . . words which estranged us . . . words which meant nothing, just for the sake of saying something . . . just words. . . . I remember now . . . they were not really mine. But why did I repulse him when he wished to kiss me at parting ? He must have thought it strange . . .

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and why this sudden repugnance? Ah, yes, now I remember. I was sitting down, looking at the ground. . . . I was just going to speak about myself and was so upset that I could not look up. . . . I was going to say things that one never says, and at that moment I realised he was thinking of himself and his own gratification. . . . I saw that terrible expression and understood what he wanted. Then he accepted lightly what I gave."

She let the curtain fall, left the window, as if to blot out a painful vision, and endeavoured to drown the memory by thinking of the youthful friend who had charmed her in the past with his grace and refinement. But that touch of André's hands had been a disquieting sensation; he was a stranger to her now, and she wondered again what sort of a person he really was.

A lamp was brought in, and Bertha sat down by the table; her glance fell upon a photograph-frame decorated with flowers by Mdlle. Picot, and containing photographs of Aunt Christine, the children and Fernand, and one of Albert at the time of their marriage.

"Did he ever look like that?" thought Bertha, striving to recall him as he had first appeared to her—an image now almost blotted from her memory. "I don't like this photograph; the face is handsome, but vacant, without life or soul—it is just the face of an ordinary young man—we were both young then—we had not lived together. To live together, what an

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experience, what tears, what struggles, what mistakes, before understanding each other. I fancied Albert did not love me, that he avoided me. . . . I know now that he loves me as much as he can. He's the restless one now, poor fellow ! ”

Hearing Emma come in, she rose, saying to that unknown self within her : “ Must one love and suffer so terribly just to know a little about one's self ? ”



“ I will speak to him. . . . I will free myself gently, without hurting him,” Bertha reflected as she was dressing to call on Mme. Grassin. “ He will walk along the road with me and then we can talk. . . . ” She did not know exactly what she would say, but felt that when the time came words would come to her. She hunted in her box for a pink silk petticoat, and chose a dress rather too smart for Noizic, but suitable for calling on Mme. Grassin ; she thought : “ He hasn't seen it and he'll like it.”

On leaving Mme. Grassin's, she paid a short call on Mme. Chaurant, and asked André to walk back with her.

When they had passed the Clausey's garden she said suddenly : “ We must forget what has happened, and just be friends.”

André was aware of a change in Bertha before she spoke, and he thought bitterly : “ What a

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capricious woman, no temperament, and incapable of love ! I've wasted a lot of time." And he began to think of his work in Paris.

Bertha wished André to continue to admire her, even to love her a little ; she noticed his coldness, and forgot that she had arranged to meet him for the sole purpose of a final farewell. Her one thought now was to keep him, and she assumed an air of melancholy, saying, in a voice full of emotion : " It takes great courage to talk like this, but it is my duty."

" Oh ! the deceit of women ! " thought André, but he felt he had to answer :

" I understand."

" You will forget me," said Bertha, sadly.

" No," he said gravely, and then, fixing his thoughtful eyes upon the ground as though unable to look at her, he added gently, " I am sure you're already sorry. . . ."

" I regret nothing," she replied, controlling her emotion, and they walked for a few minutes in silence.

" You will come to see me as soon as we are in Paris, won't you ? " said Bertha.

" Yes."

They stopped at the gate.

" *Au revoir*," she murmured, smiling dreamily and holding André's hand in hers.



" How dreadful ! " Bertha exclaimed, going quickly to her room. " I'm such a coward and

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so wretchedly vain that I have become a liar. I have lied with my eyes, my silence, my voice ; I have debased myself entirely." She looked severely into her mirror :

" Yes, you've done it."

She took off her hat, unfastened her dress, which fell at her feet, and sat down to unlace her high boots. Half-dressed, she walked about aimlessly among the garments she had thrown down.

" It is not my fault," she cried, flinging herself on the bed to stifle her sobs in the pillow. Her tears brought relief. " No," she thought, wiping her eyes with a soft, damp handkerchief, " my true self is free from mad fancies and deception."

All at once she remembered that Albert would soon return, and this thought was like an escape from a stifling prison into a higher, clearer atmosphere of truth and peace, where she could breathe freely.

♦ ♦ ♦

Nothing in her life seemed very different, yet everything wore an unaccustomed aspect. " Why ? " she asked herself, and was astonished to find that a solitary event could change her view of the world and her own mental outlook. Trying to analyse her thoughts, she concentrated upon the latest recollection and said : " To love what one knows—sincerity—mutual sincerity, and now to have come to this spiritual destitution ! "

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Already, as she thought of Albert, her past did not seem such a tormented and mistaken thing ; but rather a warm and intimate existence together.

She thought calmly of André. She reflected : “ He will love again, and may it be with his whole heart. With all his young energy he will pursue his ideal, and then, one day, the unexpected will happen, and he will have the comfortable feeling of being at last on the right road.”

♦ ♦ ♦

Emma was cheerful in spite of her bereavement ; she was faithful to duty, happily absorbed in the trivial daily round, and Bertha contrasted this poor widow with herself. She thought, too, of love and of life, and, to give form to her thoughts, she tried to remember a phrase she had once heard. “ The bed of the river ” were the only words that she could recall, and they suggested the idea of stability—the stability of a well-ordered life whose stream flows constantly in its appointed course ; a present, consistent with its past ; that firm reality of feeling, consecrated by spiritual experiences. She thought, too, of that short passage through rapids which had engulfed her for a moment, and from whose cataract she had escaped, as it were, by a miracle.

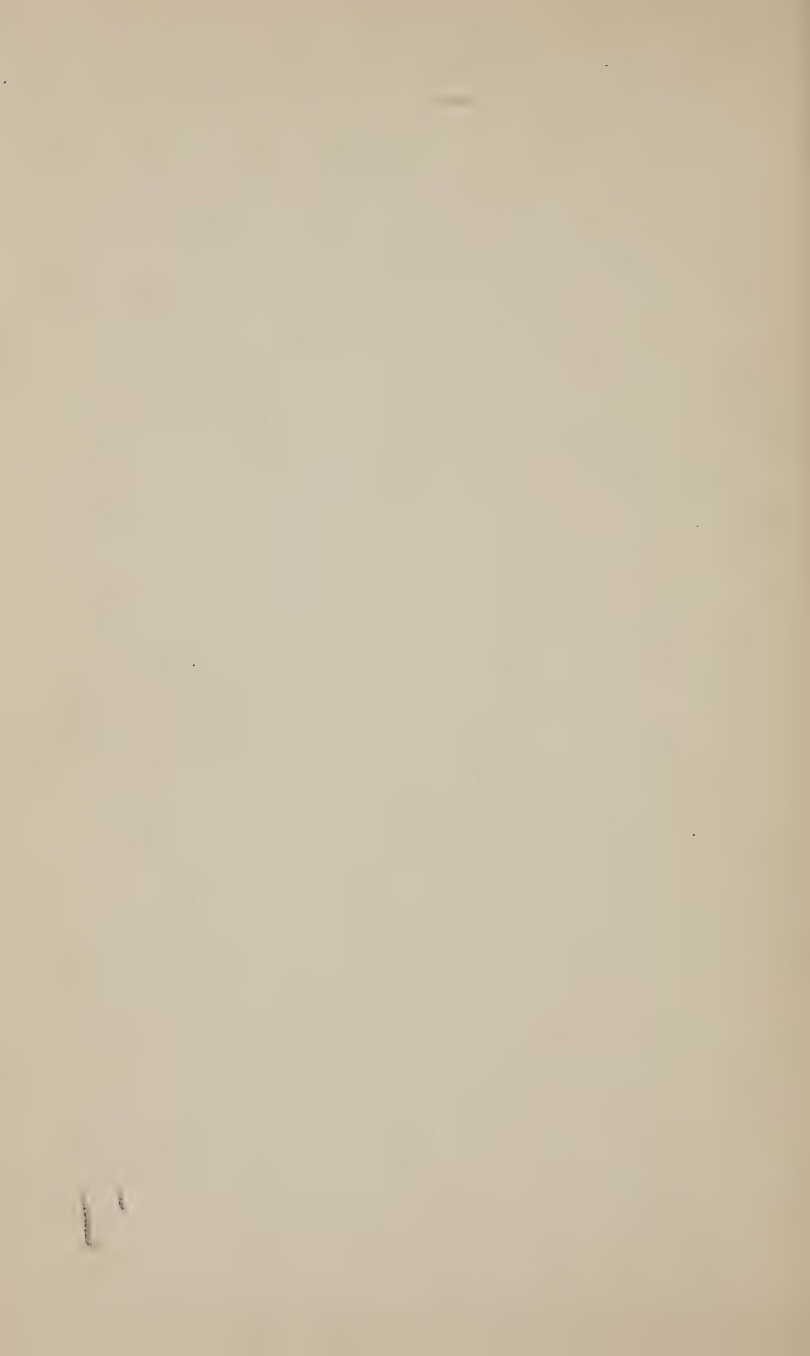
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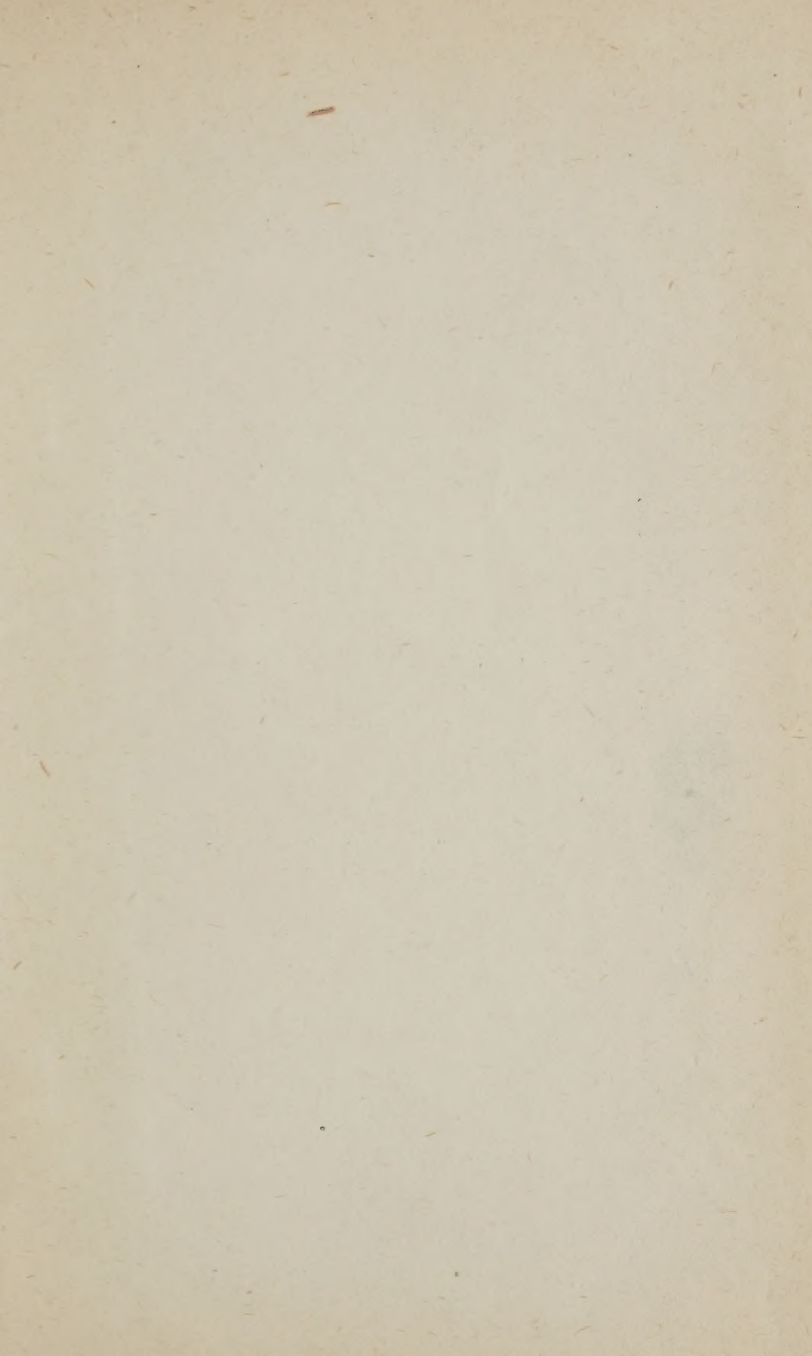
On that morning Bertha walked slowly to the railway station. She would be restless and

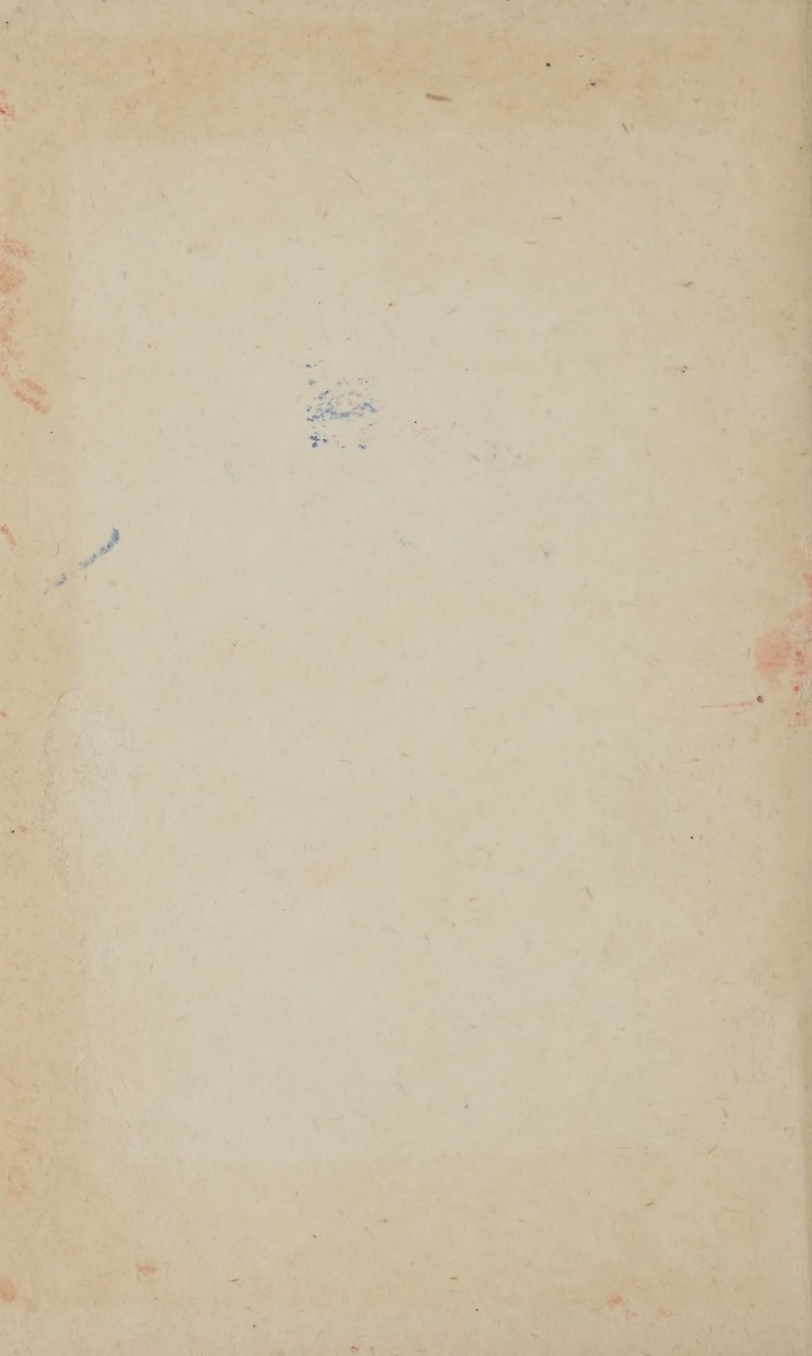
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impatient if she were obliged to wait there. Beyond the Saint Hilaire woods she saw the smoke from the engine and hastened her steps, arriving on the platform just as the train came to a standstill. She went quickly towards the carriage where she had seen Albert. He smiled at her as he stood waiting for the person ahead of him to alight.

THE END







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